"THE PET SPIRIT"—A mystery novel of chills and thrills by T. T. Flynn—"One Mistake Per Man"—A. A. CAFFREY

Short Stories

June 25th

Twice A Month

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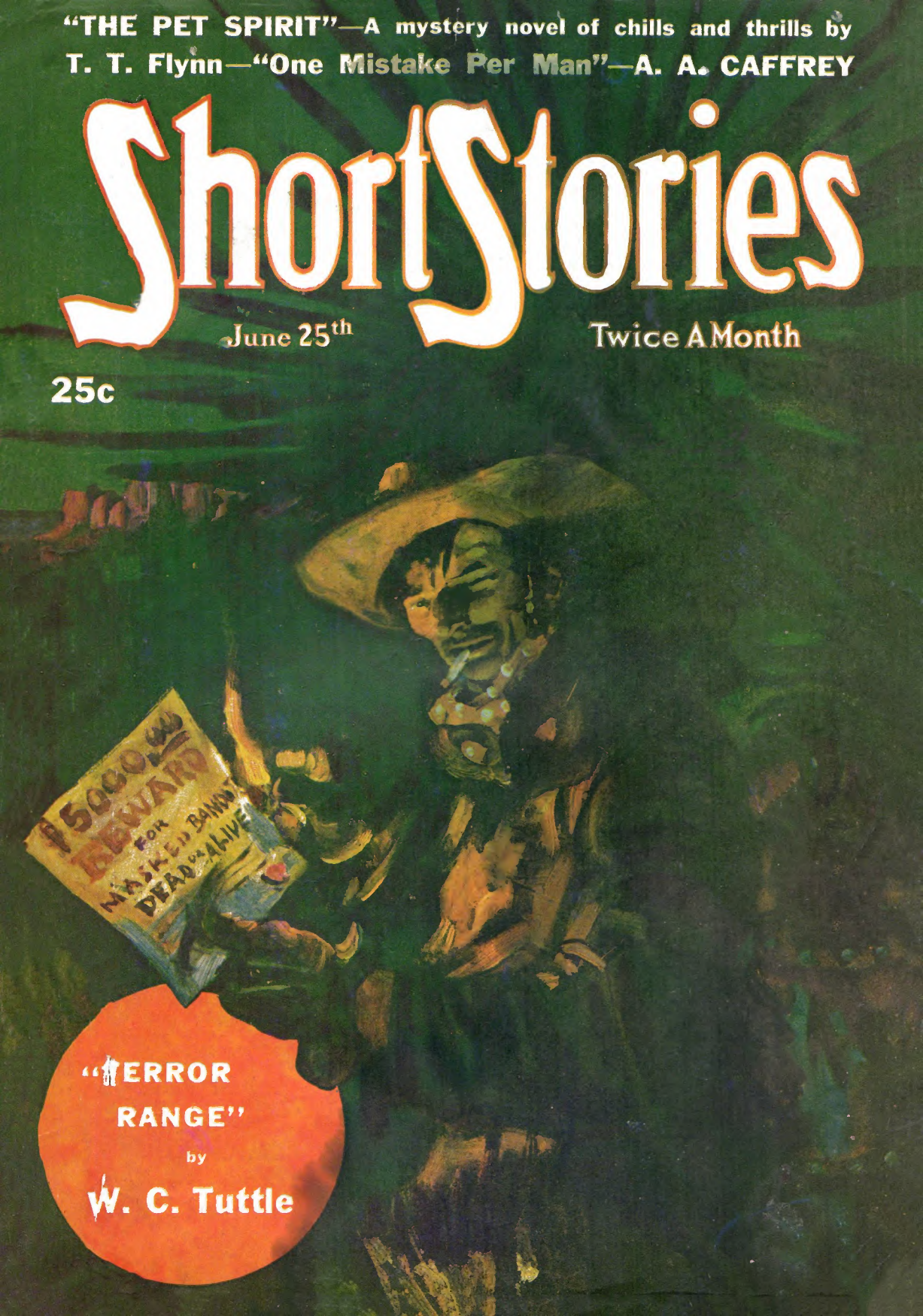

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by

W. C. Tuttle

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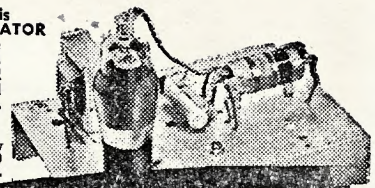

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THE BEST OF AMERICA'S ACTION ADVENTURE MYSTERY

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June 25th, 1946

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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The Story Tellers' Circle

Favorite Leather Pushers

REGULAR customers may remember that in the March 25th SHORT STORIES author Byron Bishop delivered himself of the following S. T. Circle opinion, quote: "For sheer courage and ring dynamite . . . give me old Sam Langford. . . ."

Well, we introduced that piece by saying that every reader is entitled to his opinion, especially a fight-fan reader. Here's one of them, Jack Webber of Pasadena, Calif., who has a man-sized and well-expressed (we think) slant on this business of favorite fighters.

"Brother Bishop's letter about his favorite boxer will probably start the brawl he mentions, but I won't be in it. I'm not even mentioning the name of my favorite fighter, though I could prove by statistics a mile long, that he was the greatest of them all. Yeah, and if some dope showed up with two miles of statistics to prove my man was just a tramp, I'd get sore and mebbe want to make somethin' out of it—depending on the bird's size of course.

"Now, I yield to no man in my admiration for the fighting qualities of Old Sam Langford, but the tendency of his admirers to build him into a pugilistic Paul Bunyan, is to be deplored. He was good, but not that good.

"I sat in on several of Sam's best fights, and a couple of his worst ones. The last time, was when he stepped four rounds with fat Willie Meehan. That was in San Francisco, in 1919. The Old Boy seemed more interested in keeping a pair of oversize trunks from slipping their moorings, than in putting Willie away. Even when he finally woke up and went after the fat one, Willie absorbed his best punches without going down. At the finish Sam raised his own hand, but the referee raised Willie's and that's the one that counted. The Tar Baby, as the papers called him, but no one else, must have weighed close to two and a quarter that night, which is some pounds over that one sixty, Bro. Bishop mentions.

"No, Sam wasn't all through then, for he went on and won some good fights. But let's go away back, to his first fight with Jim Flynn. Sam rushed out in the first round and knocked his man cold with the very first punch of the fight. Everyone was amazed, for Flynn was considered very tough. He later fought two good fights with Sam, even though he was put away both times. I saw the pictures of one of those fights. It looked as though Flynn was forcing his man back step by step, and if you didn't keep too close tab on the punches, one might think he was winning. To get this effect, they simply ran the film backward. Fight pictures didn't make the newsreels in those days. You saw the Pathe News for a nickel. It cost real money, four bits at least, to see a fight picture.

"I didn't see the Langford vs. Jack Johnson fight. Old as I am, that was a little before my time. I did have the details though, from a couple of eye witnesses, and they both agree: That Sam put up a whale of a fight, he did not knock Johnson down, and he was down twice himself.

"At the finish, Sam was much the worse for wear, and had convinced those present, that he would never see the day when he could take the man who was to become the dark cloud of the boxing game.

"When Johnson became top man, he refused to meet Sam because there was no money in it. Did you ever hear of a promoter offering a sizeable purse for such a fight? Li'l Arthur fought for money—never for marbles or chalk. But folks loved old Sam, and they disliked the cocky Johnson, so the tradition grew up that Arthur always turned the color of wet wood ashes at the mere mention of the name—Langford.

"I saw Sam and Stanley Ketchel fight six rounds, no decision, in Philadelphia, and every second was crammed with T. N. T. At the finish, there was little to choose between them, but the papers, at least most of them, gave Ketchel the edge. That night, Sam was in top condition, but he looked fully as tall and much heavier than his white opponent.

"Sam was stopped by lanky Fred Fulton, in a bout that had a lot of folks yelling 'Fake,' but Sam had simply had the good sense to get out of the ring when he found himself unable to see. It was here he received the eye injury that eventually ended his ring career, though he continued on for some years after this bout.

"There are those who will heatedly insist that he kept right on fighting, and even defeating foreign champions, after his eyesight was entirely gone. If you believe this just shut your eyes tight, spin around a few times, and with your eyes still closed, try to do a little shadow boxing, or invite your wife to a bit of light sparring. Can you imagine what would happen, two trained men in the ring—and one of them blind? Why Samson didn't do anything like that in the Old Testament days. He just pulled down a temple, something comparatively easy.

"But, what's the use, after all is said and done, there is just one super-duper ring man, and that's my champion—or yours, or the other fellow's."

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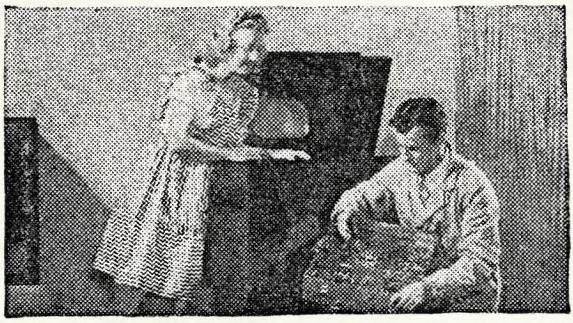

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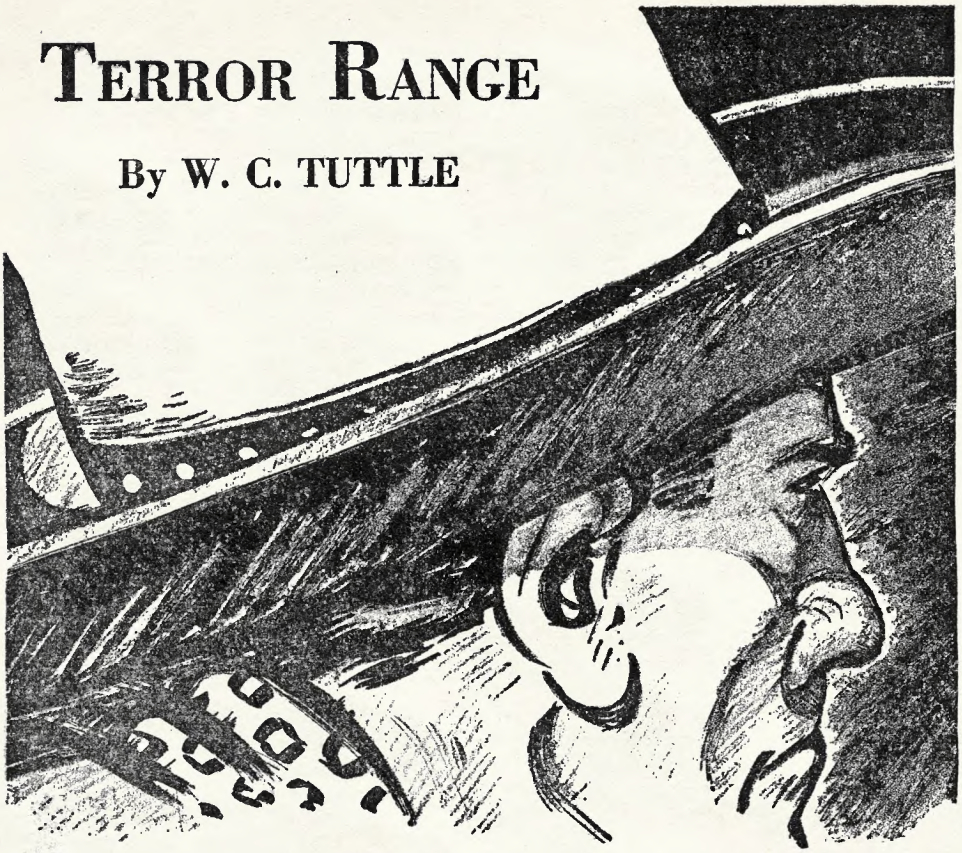
TERROR RANGE

By W. C. TUTTLE



A MAN had told them, "On the other side of that there range is the Tumblin' Moon country, and any road or trail yuh take will prob'ly lead yuh to Red Wells."

Probably. Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens were doubtful. For hours they had followed trails from the main divide, with lowering skies and high winds. Darkness added to the discomfort, and for miles they had ridden in single-file over a dim trail, while a wind howled through the little canyons, straight into their faces.

For over an hour there had been no conversation, because of the wind, but now the horses found an old road, which gave the two men a chance to ride together again. On their left was the dim outline of an old wire fence, and Sleepy said:

"Beginnin' to look like civilization."

"Yuh mean human habitation, Sleepy," corrected Hashknife.

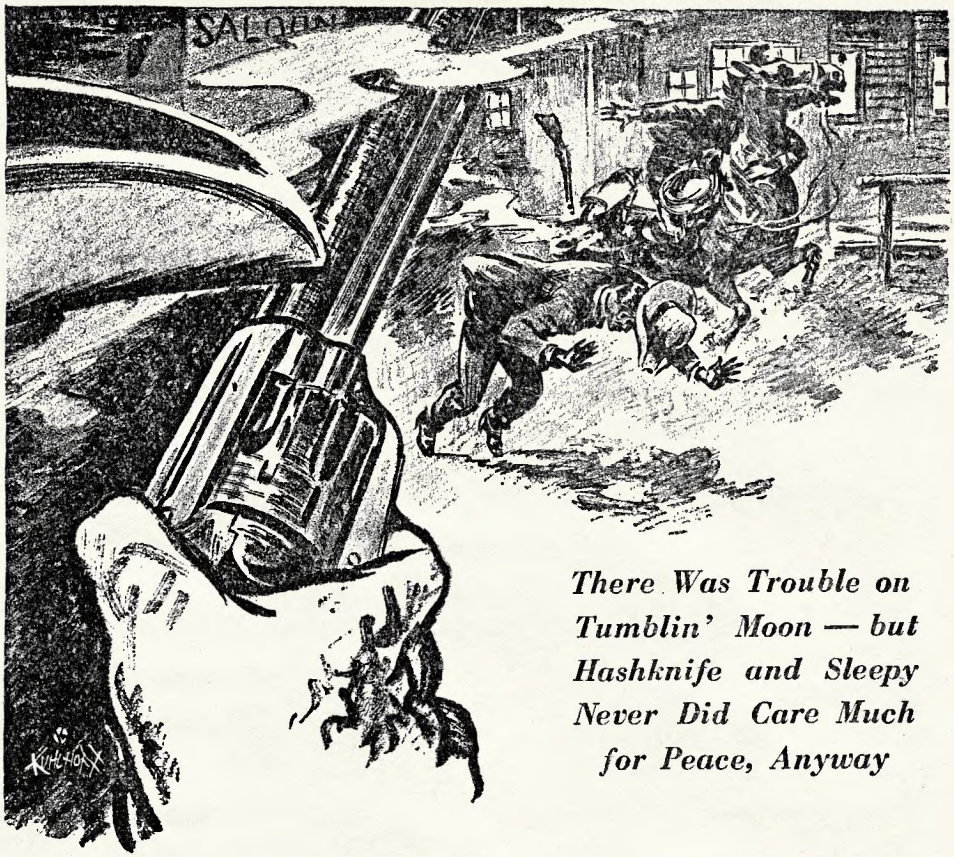
Hashknife always contended that civilization, if it existed, was only skin-deep. Sleepy didn't argue the question. As if by mutual consent, the two horses swung in against what seemed to be a gate. The two riders searched the darkness to the left. Suddenly, only a short distance away, a match was lighted. In that momentary flash they had the impression of a house, near the gate.

"Howdy, folks!" Hashknife called.

There was no reply for several moments —and then it came—a number of flashes and a fusillade of bullets, all badly aimed, it seemed.

A moment later the two cowboys were flat on the ground, and their horses moved away along the fence, where they stopped.

There were no more shots fired. Then they heard the sound of horses galloping, the thud of hoofs dying away in the wind. They got to their feet, caught their horses and took them back to the gate. It was not fastened. The small ranch-house was not



There Was Trouble on Tumblin' Moon — but Hashknife and Sleepy Never Did Care Much for Peace, Anyway

over fifty feet from the gate, but there was no sign of occupancy.

They went carefully, feeling their way, worked their way along a porch to the few steps and went up to the front door. Hashknife hammered on the door, but there was no response.

"That was a funny deal—shootin' at us thataway," said Sleepy.

"Some folks are awful impulsive," said Hashknife soberly.

He knocked on the door again, but still there was no response. He tried the door and found it unlocked, and from the room came the acrid scent of burned gun-powder. Slowly he moved inside, out of the wind, and lighted a match.

"Somethin' wrong here, Sleepy," he said quietly. "Wait—I'll light the lamp."

The lamp-chimney was still warm. Sleepy came in behind him, as the light flared up, and Hashknife replaced the chimney. It was a neat, well-kept living-room, indicating a feminine influence. Sprawled on a Navajo rug, almost in front of the fireplace, was a man, blood seeping through his gray shirt. He was gray-haired, smooth-shaved, neat.

Hashknife moved in close to him. On the man's shirt was pinned a square of cardboard, on which was crudely printed the one word—RUSTLER. Sleepy said tensely:

"Funny thing, Hashknife; they usually lynch rustlers."

Hashknife knelt down beside the man and picked up a limp hand, quickly testing the pulse.

"Still alive," he said, and got quickly to his feet.

Someone was outside the front of the house. They could hear voices, as footsteps clattered on the porch, and the door opened. It was a young woman and a youngish man. They stopped short at sight of the two strangers. The man put his left hand in front of the woman and stepped partly in front of her, his eyes looking over the situation.

"Howdy, folks," said Hashknife quietly. "I reckon yuh came just in time. We're strangers and we don't know where to find a doctor."

THE woman saw the man on the floor, and her face went white, as she hurried over to him. The man kept an eye on Hashknife and Sleepy, but followed her.

"Who did this?" he asked huskily. "What happened—here?"

The lamplight flashed on his badge. He seemed rather young to be a sheriff.

"You better tell us, Sheriff; we're strangers," Hashknife replied. "We pulled up at the gate out there. Somebody was outside the house, and I called to them. For no reason we can figure out, they took shots at us. After they pulled out, we came in here —and found this man."

The sheriff drew a deep breath and turned to the girl, who said: "We've got to get a doctor—quick! I'll go—you stay here."

Not waiting for any argument, she ran out, and they heard her galloping away. The sheriff leaned against the fireplace, his young face grim in the lamplight, as he looked at Hashknife Hartley. Hashknife was nearly seven feet tall in his high-heel boots and sombrero, slender, tough as a steel cable. He had a long, lean face, generous nose, rather high cheek-bones and a wide mouth. Men might forget that face, but they never forgot his eyes; clear, steel-gray, and they seemed to look deeper than the surface. Many men could testify on oath that they did, too.

Sleepy was just under six feet in height, broad of shoulder and long-armed. His legs were slightly bowed. Sleepy believed what he saw, and, judging from the grin-wrinkles on his face, most of it was rather funny.

"The young lady," remarked Hashknife, "ain't exactly a clingin' vine."

"That's her father," replied the sheriff shortly.

"How far does she have to go for the doctor?" asked Sleepy.

"Red Wells—five miles."

"My name's Hartley," said Hashknife, after another period of silence. "His is Stevens."

"Thank yuh," nodded the sheriff. "I'm Jack Conley."

"Glad to meetcha," said Sleepy. The sheriff leaned down and took the square of cardboard off the wounded man's chest.

"How do yuh explain that card, Sheriff?" asked Hashknife.

Jack Conley shook his head, his lips grim as he said slowly: "Jean and I went to Red Wells early this evenin'. Everythin' was all right—here. I dunno what happened."

"No rustlin' trouble?" asked Hashknife.

The young sheriff drew a deep breath, and replied sharply: "Amos Black was no rustler! I tell yuh, he's one of the finest men I know. I'd swear under oath that he's as honest as a dollar. Why this was done—I don't know. You say that several men shot at yuh?"

"I saw at least three flashes," replied Sleepy. "Hashknife yelled, 'Howdy, folks!' and then they started shootin'."

"Queer things happen in the Tumblin' Moon range," said the sheriff quietly. "I dunno what it's all about."

Hashknife's ears pricked up quickly. "Queer things?" he asked.

"Yeah—queer things," replied the sheriff, rather defiantly.

"Like this?" asked Sleepy.

"This—and other things. Where are you boys from?"

"We came over the hills from Rojo Flats. Worked for the K-Ten."

The sheriff nodded, staring down at the wounded man.

"Nothin' we can do for him," said Hashknife. "Better not move him, until the doctor gets here. Might hurt him worse'n he is. Just him and the girl in the family?"

"That's all. Jean works in the bank at Red Wells, but lives here."

"I like her," said Sleepy. "She's mighty pretty, and she didn't stop to throw any wingding. Most girls would have throwed a fit, but she went for the doctor."

"She's like that," said the sheriff. "Crazy about her father, but never loses her head. We was—" he drew a deep breath, "we was goin' to get married Saturday."

Hashknife rolled and lighted a cigarette, his eyes studying the young sheriff. Finally he said quietly: "You spoke of trouble around here, Sheriff."

"Well, I dunno—I suppose you'd call it that, Hartley. Con Weaver, the sheriff, was

shot and killed two weeks ago. I was his deputy, and they appointed me sheriff. Nobody else wanted the job, I guess."

"Any other queer things?" asked Hashknife.

"Well, yeah, I reckon so, Hartley. Poisoned water-holes, a train-load of cows wrecked, and forty head killed. Things like that."

"Sounds interestin'," remarked Sleepy. "What's the general opinion on these things, pardner?"

The sheriff shook his head slowly. "That's the trouble," he said quietly. "Nobody has an opinion—they just don't talk, that's all."

Hashknife looked sharply at the sheriff. "Don't talk?" he asked.

"Won't talk—if that makes it any clearer," replied the sheriff.

"That's funny," said Sleepy.

"Funny — yeah — maybe, but nobody laughs. Ain't there anythin' we can do for him, Hartley?" indicating the wounded man.

Hashknife shook his head. "He's restin' all right. Maybe they made a mistake in not bein' sure he was dead."

"That's right—maybe he can tell who shot him."

"Maybe," suggested Hashknife, "he won't talk either."

"Like the rest of 'em," sighed the sheriff.

"We might as well set down and take it easy," suggested Hashknife. "That doctor can't get here for a while yet. It might be a good idea to start a fire in the kitchen and heat up a lot of water; the doctor will need plenty."

"Good idea," agreed the sheriff. "It'll give us somethin' to do."

WHEN the old wood stove was crackling merrily, the sheriff leaned against a table and rolled a cigarette, his eyes thoughtful.

"Yuh know," he remarked, "this is a queer deal. I walk in on you two strangers, and a wounded man on the floor. By all rights, I should have arrested both of yuh. I got yuh kinda red-handed. But," he grinned slowly, "all I done was make friends with yuh. Maybe I'm wrong."

"Maybe yuh are," replied Hashknife soberly.

"Lack of experience," said Sleepy. "You'll learn, Jack."

The sheriff laughed shortly. "I'll take a chance," he said. "Right at first I thought maybe you two had done it. It was right on my mind to arrest both of yuh, but—well, it's kinda funny, but when Hartley looked at me and said, 'You better tell us, Sheriff; we're strangers,' I knew blamed well you didn't do it. I think Jean felt the same way."

Hashknife smiled slowly. "Jack," he said, "if we'd done it, you would never have seen us. We're a hard pair to sneak up on."

"Yeah, I believe yuh are, Hartley. How come yuh ran into this deal?"

"Like I told yuh, we drifted over from the K-Ten near Rojo Flats. It just happened that we came down a trail that ended at an old road, and the road came here. We wanted to know how to get to Red Wells. But when I yelled at somebody—we got shot at for our trouble. We're funny thataway—we wanted to find out why they shot at us."

"Just a couple of nosey cowpokes," said Sleepy. "Can't seem to mind our own business."

"I think it's yore business, when somebody shoots at yuh."

"Well, we kinda feel thataway. As yuh might say, things like that are awful personal."

JEAN brought Doctor Miles and Pecos Jim Price, the deputy sheriff, with her. There was not much conversation while the doctor examined Amos Black, finally moving him into a bedroom. The old doctor was much pleased over the supply of hot water. He looked Hashknife over, nodded his head, and said to the others:

"The rest of you keep out. This man will help me. We've got to get those two bullets. Now, clear out."

The doctor closed the door. The sheriff said, "That's funny—you'd think he'd want one of us—somebody he knows."

Pecos, a skinny, tough-looking, old rawhider, spat into the fireplace and grinned, as he shook his head.

"Ain't funny," he said. "I'd take the tall feller m'self."

"He's pretty handy," remarked Sleepy.

Jean and the sheriff sat together, neither

of them saying anything. Old Pecos, scorning a chair, hunched on his heels against the wall, puffing away at a cigarette. Jean had not asked the sheriff any questions, nor did the sheriff offer any explanations. Finally Sleepy said: "It's kinda funny—nobody wonderin' who done it—nobody tryin' to figure out why it was done. What's wrong with Tumblin' Moon?"

No one answered, but finally Pecos said, "Yeah—that's the question."

"There must be an answer," said the sheriff gloomily.

"Dad never hurt anybody in his life," said Jean. "I don't know what is wrong. For several months he's been different—worrying, I think. He never says that anything is wrong, but I know. He doesn't act the same. And now—this—"

"Rustler!" snorted Pecos. "Amos Black never stole cows. Shucks, he don't even raise cows—he raises horses."

"Is somebody takin' the law in their own hands?" asked Sleepy.

Pecos shrugged his thin shoulders. "*Quien sabe?* But if they have, the law shore erred in this deal. I dunno—it shore queer doin's."

Hashknife came out to them a little later, and he had both bullets in his hand.

"Doc thinks he'll do all right," he said quietly. "A rib turned one bullet, and the other didn't hit a vital spot. Doc will be out in a few minutes."

"Thank you for helping him," said Jean.

Hashknife smiled. "Yo're welcome, Miss Black. Glad to be able to."

Hashknife hunched down beside Pecos and rolled a cigarette. The old rawhider looked him over approvingly, squinted closely as Hashknife's long fingers fashioned the smoke. His eyes shifted to the holstered Colt in its short, hand-made holster, the wooden handle scarred from use.

The old doctor came out, rolling down his sleeves. No one asked him any questions. He put on his coat and sat down. Finally Hashknife spoke:

"I reckon we'll be driftin', folks," he said.

"Are you stayin' here tonight, Doc?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes."

"I'll stay, too—if you want me to, Jean?"

"I wish you would, Jack."

"I'll ride back with yuh, Hartley," offered Pecos.

As they got ready to go, the doctor said quietly: "Much obliged, Hartley; you've been a big help to me. You should have been a surgeon."

"Thank yuh, Doc," smiled the tall cowboy. "I've thrown a lot of lead, but this is the first time I ever helped take any out."

"I would like to add my thanks, Mr. Hartley," said Jean.

"Yo're mighty welcome, Miss Black. Good night, folks."

The three men went outside. Jean said: "Nobody thought to introduce me to those two men."

"That's a funny thing," said the sheriff. "Nobody thought of it."

"I wasn't introduced either, Jean," smiled the doctor. "Something about the man that makes you feel you've known him for years."

"I felt the same way," said the sheriff. "Maybe it's the way he looks at yuh."

"I noticed his eyes," said Jean. "They certainly look through you."

As the three men were going down the road toward Red Wells, Pecos said: "Yuh know—that name Hartley kinda struck me, and when Sleepy called yuh Hashknife, I knowed you was the same man. Yuh see, this cousin of mine lives down in the Camarillo country, and he wrote me a while ago."

"I'm glad we was able to help him out, Pecos," said Hashknife. "But I wouldn't want the folks in Tumblin' Moon to get an idea that me and Sleepy are a couple law-men, 'cause we ain't. We're just a couple driftin' cowpokes—tryin' to get along."

"A clam," said Pecos soberly, "is an awful gabby critter compared with me—when I don't aim to talk."

"Thank yuh, Pecos. Jack Conley spoke about queer things around this range."

"Yeah, I reckon you'd designate it as such, Hashknife. Yuh see, this is a pretty big cow country in here. There's eight spreads, all fair-sized, and that means a lot of shippin'. As far as I can figure out, this whole thing started when Tom Fallon, who owns the Box F, got all beat up and tied to a tree between Red Wells and his

ranch. He either didn't know, or wouldn't tell who done it.

"That kinda started the thing—as far as I can figure. It kinda seemed that the cow-men kept away from each other—didn't have anythin' to do with each other. Dang it, they wasn't even friendly to each other, it looked like. Then a shipment of Lou Archer's Lazy A cows went into the ditch in Crazy Horse Wash, and forty head of fat steers was killed. Somebody had unspiked a rail in the track, and the whole train was wrecked. It was plumb deliberate. That didn't help the feelin' among the cow-men.

"A little later a water-hole on the TJ spread was poisoned, and they had dead cows all over the place. Con Weaver was the sheriff—and a good one—but he couldn't do a thing. Nobody'd talk. One night, Con rode into town, started for the depot, and was shot in the back. That was when they appointed Jack Conley. I ain't no law-man, Hashknife—but nobody else would be the deputy.

"Along about that time, we got a letter from the Cattlemen's Association—sort of a confidential thing, askin' us for information. It seemed that every danged outfit in Tumblin' Moon had resigned from the association—and wouldn't explain why. And now—Amos Black is shot down. I dunno—it shore makes yuh wonder why."

"Yeah, I reckon it would," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "But why would they claim that Amos Black was a rustler?"

"I dunno. Tom Fallon had the same kind of a sign pinned on him, too. Tom wouldn't talk. Jist said he didn't know who done it—and he said they didn't tell him why they beat him up."

"Uh-huh. You say they shot the sheriff on his way to the depot?"

"They shore did! A handful of buckshot in the back."

"I wonder if Jack Conley has ever been warned."

"Yuh might say—he has, Hashknife. A couple days after Con was killed, Jack got a note. It wasn't signed by anybody, and it said:

" 'If you like yore job and yore life—mind yore own business.' "

"Did it scare him?" asked Sleepy.

"Well," drawled Pecos, "they got Con in the back—at night. Jack ain't the scarey kind—but how'd you feel?"

"I'd be too danged busy runnin' to ever feel," said Sleepy.

"It kinda looks to me," remarked Hashknife, "that we've come to a place where a stranger will be about as welcome as a rattler in a road-runner's convention."

"Well," said Pecos soberly, "if I was you I wouldn't ask too many questions from the people. Yuh won't get any answers. I'll bet on that."

"It's funny they'd all resign from the association," said Hashknife. "That don't make sense, Pecos. Has the association ever sent an investigator down here lately?"

"Yuh mean a cow-detective? Nope. As long as they ain't got any members down here, why would they?"

"Well, hasn't the association made any effort to find out why they resigned?"

"That," said Pecos dryly, "could only be answered by a former member—and, like I said—they ain't talkin'."

Pecos went with them to the Red Wells hotel, and introduced them to Mike Stranahan, the hotel keeper. Mike was a hard-faced Irishman, with small, blue eyes and a touch of asthma. He looked Hashknife and Sleepy over carefully, as he shoved out the dog-eared register, and squinted carefully at the sprawled H. Hartley and S. Stevens.

"Where are ye from?" he asked.

"Nowhere," replied Hashknife seriously.

"Every man is from somewhere, my friend."

"They should be," agreed Hashknife. "If you must have a place for us to be from, write it in yourself—we may have been there."

Mike scratched his head and put away the book. Then he said, "Go up the one stairs, str-raight down the hall, and it's the fourth door to the right. If there's no water in the pitcher, you can go down the back stairs to the pump."

"I'll see yuh in the mornin'," said Pecos, grinning.

The two cowboys dumped their war-bags in a corner and sat down to enjoy a smoke. Hashknife sprawled on half of the bed, blowing smoke-rings at the ceiling, while Sleepy took off his boots and relaxed in an old chair.

"Happy, huh?" asked Sleepy.

"Happy?" queried Hashknife. "Well, I dunno—"

"Yuh do know, too. Ever since we hit Amos Black's ranch, you've been like a varmint hound on a fresh scent. Yore ears stick straight out, and yuh have to swaller to keep from bayin'."

Hashknife smiled slowly. "Well, it is kinda queer, Sleepy," he said.

"Queer and dangerous," said Sleepy.

"Yea-a-ah. Yuh know, it's awful queer—all them cattlemen quittin' the association. Huh! Poisoned water, buckshot in the back—and nobody willin' to talk about it. I wonder what Bob Marsh—"

"Never mind Bob Marsh," interrupted Sleepy. "He'd hire us to find out—and we ain't got will-power enough to defy him."

Bob Marsh, secretary of the cattlemen's association, was Sleepy's pet obsession.

"I wasn't askin' him for the job," said Hashknife. "I just thought he might have some idea what was goin' on down here. Under the circumstances, my idea is that we'll ride on and keep our noses clean. What's yore suggestion?"

"The same as yours—you liar. Let's hit the hay."

THEY were an odd pair, these two drifting cowboys, who were always heading for a hill, just to see what might be on the other side. Hashknife Hartley, christened Henry, was from Montana, son of a range minister, while Sleepy Dave Stevens was a native of Idaho. They met on the cattle ranch which gave Hashknife his nickname, two tophand cowboys, who couldn't stay still, and there they formed a partnership, which had lasted through the years.

Money meant little to them, because their wants were few, and they only worked long enough for a small stake, and headed for another hill. Hashknife had made a study of human nature, the reasons-why of humanity, and to him, a mystery in the rangeland was a challenge. Both he and Sleepy were fatalists. Their lives had proved to them that things were ordained, and that somewhere there was a big book, in which all names were listed, their fates decreed.

Neither of them were split-second gunmen, but many times had they backed out of powder-smoke, unscathed, while gunmen reputed as fast as rattlers, had died. It wasn't their time: the moving finger had not yet pointed to their entry in that big book.

Law enforcement agencies wanted their assistance, but they did not care to work for the law. As Hashknife had said, "The law ain't always justice—and that's what we like to see done."

Sleepy didn't analyze anything. He was a happy-go-lucky cowpoke, laughing at the world, willing to let Hashknife figure out all the problems. But when it came to the showdown, Sleepy was always ready with fist or gun to back up his lanky partner's findings. Neither of them had ever married. Sleepy was always ready to fall in love, but never quite did it. He said, "I don't want to break the set," and let it go at that.

They were not flashy in their garb. In fact, they were rather colorless, looking like the run-of-the-mill, working cowpokes. No colors nor silver-trimmings for these two—faded, colorless shirts, overalls, nondescript sombreros and plain, high-heel boots. Their gun-belts and holsters were not decorated, and their riding rigs were plain.

Danger was always with them. Their reputations were well-known, and the owl-hoot boys were always just a bit apprehensive at the sound of their names. But they didn't hate criminals. Hashknife's theory was that a criminal, in most cases, was a good boy, who got off on the wrong trail.

He said, "Sometimes you've got to eliminate them for the good of a society that'd be just as bad, if not worse, if they wasn't scared to go bad. Very few folks are good, through and through, but fear of the law, or what their neighbor might think, keeps 'em straight."

Odd philosophy, perhaps, but life had taught Hashknife a lot about his fellowmen.

THE business section of Red Wells consisted of about three blocks of false-fronted buildings along a dusty street. What sidewalks there were consisted of planks, nailed xylophone-like on heavy sills. There were four saloons along the street, the largest being the Black Hawk, owned and operated by Jim Cleary, a hard-faced, keen-eyed gambler.

Red Wells was strictly a cattle town, a shopping center for a big range. Hashknife

and Sleepy wandered around the town next day, but no one seemed inclined to talk with strangers. There was very little conversation regarding the attempted murder of Amos Black.

Jack Conley, the sheriff, came in from the ranch, and told them that Amos Black was doing nicely. Jack was very frank.

"Hashknife," he said, "I've got a hunch that he knew who shot him—but he won't talk about it. Says he didn't remember anythin'. Jean said she was sorry she didn't talk more to yuh, but she was kinda stunned over the whole thing."

"I didn't expect her to talk," smiled Hashknife. "I figure she was mighty brave and cool over the whole deal. The way she headed for the doctor indicated that she thinks fast."

"She's a grand girl," said the sheriff.

"Yuh know," remarked Sleepy soberly, "it's funny how women show good sense in everythin', except pickin' out a husband."

"That's awful true," grinned Jack. "I can't figure it out myself."

"Don't try it," said Sleepy. "I did. Took me so long, tryin' to get the answer that the girl got tired waitin' for me and married a sheep-herder, who didn't have brains enough to stop and think. The best way is to grab 'em first, and think afterwards."

"That's my theory," agreed Jack. "I'll see yuh later."

He went to the bank, and a few minutes later he mounted his horse and rode back toward the Black ranch. Hashknife and Sleepy drifted down to the sheriff's office, where they found Pecos Price, doing some repairs on his gun-belt.

"I been a-wonderin' why yuh didn't show up," he said. "Jack was in from the ranch a while ago. Went back out, I reckon."

"We ran into him at the hotel," said Hashknife.

"Uh-huh. Then yuh know Amos Black is doin' well—but won't talk."

"Yeah—Jack told us."

A team and wagon drew up at the sheriff's hitch-rack. A man and a woman were on the seat. Pecos craned his neck toward the window, and said, "Uncle Henry and Aunt Priscilla Bond."

The man came in. He was only about five feet, five inches tall, skinny as a rail, but with a grin a mile wide.

"Howdy, Pecos," he said. "I—uh—didn't know yuh had company."

"Hold yore fire!" exclaimed Pecos. "These here boys ain't company. Uncle Henry, I want yuh to meet Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens. Boys, this specimen is Henry Bond, which owns the Diamond B spread."

They shook hands solemnly. Henry Bond looked quizzically at Hashknife, a thoughtful expression in his eyes.

"Pleased to meetcha," he said quietly. "Yea-a-ah—I shore am."

"Got Aunt Priscilla with yuh, eh?" said Pecos.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Have to do a little shoppin'. What's this I hear about Amos gettin' shot, Pecos?"

"Yeah, he got shot, Uncle Henry—shot twice. But he's a-doin' well. Yuh know that sign we found on Tom Fallon?"

Henry Bond nodded grimly.

"They tied one on Amos Black jist like it."

"Did, huh?" Henry Bond drew a deep breath and hitched up his gun-belt.

"Amos Black never rustled anybody's cows, Uncle Henry."

" 'Course not, Pecos."

"I've got to say hello to Aunt Priscilla," announced Pecos. "Come out and meet her, boys."

Aunt Priscilla Bond was a huge woman, weighing at least two hundred and fifty, and the wagon-seat was tilted precariously on her side.

She shook hands like a man and talked like a man. She grinned at Hashknife as she said, "You're the first feller I ever shook hands with from a wagon-seat and didn't have to bend down. I appreciate it. Henry, I don't want to rub it in, but you can look at him and see the mistakes you made in growin' up."

Uncle Henry grinned. "Yeah, that's right, Ma—but I'm like a diamond; don't have to be awful big to do a lot of sparklin'. Ol' Diamond Bond, that's me; a gem of purest ray."

"What's this about Amos gettin' shot, Pecos?" she asked soberly.

Pecos told her what happened, and that there were no clues as to who fired the shots. She made no comments. Henry drew a deep breath, started to say something, but

changed his mind and climbed up to the seat. His weight made no appreciable difference in its angle.

"Come out when yuh can, Pecos—and bring the boys along—that is, if they like fried chicken and hot biscuits," said Mrs. Bond.

"Aunt Priscilla," said Sleepy soberly, "you are speaking of the food I love. We'll prob'ly be out sooner than you expect."

"Spoken like a man," she declared. "Come any time."

Henry turned the team around and they headed for home. Hashknife said, "Pecos, there goes some real people."

"Best on earth," declared the deputy. "But that's the most I've heard them talk for a month. Don't usually even stop here."

A rider came along the street, went past the office, but turned and came back.

"That's Bat Keene, owner of the Bar X," said Pecos.

Keene dismounted and came into the office. He was tall and powerfully built, square-jawed, swarthy. He glanced toward Hashknife and Sleepy, then ignored them, as he asked Pecos about Amos Black.

"I met Frank Steele down the road and he said Amos had been shot," he explained.

Pecos told him what they knew, and that Amos would live. Keene nodded, but asked no questions. Pecos introduced him to the two cowboys, but Keene didn't seem interested in them. Pecos told him that Jack Conley had gone back to the ranch.

"Well, I've got to be driftin'," he said. "Glad to have met yuh, boys."

"That's a sample of things," complained Pecos, after Keene rode away. "Yuh notice he didn't ask nothin'. We used to have dances here almost every Friday night, and everybody came. Had awful good times, too. But all to once—nobody came. Wasn't enough to pay the fiddler. Nobody visits now. Don't even come in to church. I dunno what's gone wrong—but somethin' shore has."

"Do they ship a lot of cattle out of Red Wells?" asked Sleepy.

"They did," replied Pecos. "The last shipment was from Archer's spread—the one I told yuh went into the ditch and killed forty head. No, I'm wrong. The last shipment was a hundred head of horses from Amos Black. Nothin' happened to them. Buyers have been in here since then, but they wasn't able to buy anythin'."

"Maybe," suggested Sleepy, "they're holdin' for a better price."

"Prices right now are plenty high," said Pecos. "One buyer told me he offered the highest price he's ever paid—and didn't get a single thing. And it ain't because beef is scarce either. Every one of the Tumblin' Moon cattlemen act like they was scared of everybody. You don't see 'em linin' up at the bar, treatin' each other. It shore irks me—if yuh know what that means."

"How long has it been like this?" asked Hashknife.

"All of six months—mebbe more. When Con Weaver got killed, the commissioners didn't exactly want to appoint Jack Conley as sheriff. He's too young, they said. He is a little on the young side, too. But nobody wanted the job; so they let Jack have it. I didn't want no deputy job either, but Jack was stuck for help; so I decided to help him as much as I could. I ain't much good—except in a fight. But dang it, under the circumstances, yuh can't even git up a good fight. Men have got to talk to each other, in order to start a argument, Hashknife."

"Yeah, that's true," agreed Hashknife. "You say that somebody wrote a warnin' to Conley?"

"They did. Told him if he cared to live he'd mind his own business. It didn't scare Jack. He said he didn't have any business to mind—his only business was to run his office. The kid's all right. 'Course he ain't been tested yet, but I'm bettin' on him."

"I think he's all right," said Hashknife.

RED WELLS didn't seem very busy that afternoon. Cattlemen drifted in and out, but paid little attention to each other. Hashknife and Sleepy had a vantage point on the shaded hotel porch, where they could observe things, and Hashknife's brow was furrowed in thought most of the time. He pieced together all the things they had heard, but still no theory was obtainable.

"It's been goin' on for more'n six months," commented Sleepy, "and nobody else has been able to figure it out. What can you do in one day?"

"I reckon yo're right, pardner," smiled Hashknife, and relaxed.

Pecos joined them on the porch after supper that evening. A few cowboys were in town. Pecos pointed out one of them, a huge, hulking figure, named Pete Woods, who worked for Bat Keene's Bar X. Pete wore his hair long, needed a shave, and clean clothes.

"He's got a bad rep," said Pecos. "Bad temper. They say he's awful fast with a gun—and don't mind usin' it. 'Course, that's all hearsay, Hashknife; but he looks like a bad actor."

A little later there was loud talk in the Black Hawk Saloon, and Pecos decided he'd better go over and see what was going on. Hashknife and Sleepy went over with him. The argument was over a poker game, and the loud talking was being done by Pete Woods, who had his back to the doorway. There were five men in the game, and Pete's words were apparently directed at a small, elderly man, whom Hashknife had seen on the street, walking with a cane. Something had been said, just as the three men came in, and Pete's temper flared.

"Yuh say I stole a card, do yuh?" he roared. "Me—Pete Woods? I stole a card? Why, you ol' pole-cat, I'll bat yore brains out with m' two hands!"

Pete jerked to his feet and kicked his chair back, almost against the knees of Hashknife. He slapped his palms against his thighs, leaned forward and rasped:

"Git up, you lyin' old bum! No man can call Pete Woods a thief!"

"Can't, eh?" queried Hashknife.

Pete Woods whirled, his right hand swinging back to his gun. He stared for a moment, wide-eyed and then he blinked. There was not a sound in the saloon. Pete tried to draw a deep breath, and it caught midway, causing a fluttering sound. Then his tongue licked at his dry lips, but the tongue was just as dry. Hashknife was smiling.

"Yuh say they can't, Pete?" he asked quietly.

Pete's eyes turned suspiciously moist, but he seemed incapable of speech.

"Yuh know yuh are, Pete," went on Hashknife. "Yo're a bully and a coward, too. Bad-man!"

Hashknife laughed in Pete's face. They were very close together. Two men behind Pete moved silently aside. Pete's face was white in the lamplight, and he seemed to tremble visibly. Suddenly he strangled, and streaked for his gun. He was so close to the table that his hand struck the edge of the table-top, before it could reach his gun.

And at that same instant Hashknife's left fist caught Pete on the chin. It drove him upright, and he seemed to be looking straight at the ceiling, when Hashknife shifted and lifted a right-handed uppercut that seemed to almost knock Pete's head off his neck.

Pete fell across the table, where he hung for a moment, and then slid to the floor, knocked cold. Hashknife swayed over, plucked the man's gun from his holster, walked over and laid it on the bar.

"You take care of it," he said quietly.

"My Gawd!" gasped a man, who had been in the game. "I've seen a lot of things, but I never seen a man so scared in m' life before. Why, dang it, he was plumb green!"

"Yaller," corrected the cripple, whom Pete was going to beat. "Much obliged, Tall Feller."

"Yo're welcome," smiled Hashknife.

Someone said, "Maybe his blamed neck's broken."

"Naw, it ain't," denied another. "His legs are twitchin'."

Pete gradually regained consciousness, finally sitting up. He spat out some broken teeth and looked dazedly at everyone. Then his eyes shifted to Hashknife, and he remembered. Slowly he got to his feet, clinging to the table for support, a trickle of blood running from a corner of his mouth.

"Pete, do yuh understand what I'm sayin'?" asked Hashknife.

Pete twisted his neck painfully, and said, "Yeah."

"All right—listen. Yo're headin' out of the Tumblin' Moon country right now. That warrant is still good in Colorado. Maybe I'm not a good citizen for lettin' yuh get away, but somebody will kill yuh, sooner or later. Pile on yore bronc and keep driftin'. I hope yuh understand."

Pete nodded, and headed for the doorway. He didn't even think of his gun. In a few moments they heard him gallop away. One of the men said, "I figured Pete Woods

was a bad hombre, but I didn't know the law wanted him."

"His right name is Pete Gonyer," said Hashknife, "and it does. Pete was picked up in a bunch of rustlers, but made a getaway on a horse that belonged to the sheriff. Pete hated the sheriff. He rode the horse almost to death, makin' his getaway, and then he deliberately cut the animal's throat. That's the kind of a hairpin Pete is."

"Yuh hadn't ort to have let him go," sighed Pecos. "His kind is better off behind the bars."

"Maybe," replied Hashknife. "But he's gone, Pecos. Just be glad yuh didn't have to pack food to him."

"I'll bet Bat Keene didn't know what he was," said one of the men. "Bat wouldn't stand for nothin' like that."

"Well," said the cripple, "I don't suppose Pete told him, and Bat wouldn't have any other way of knowin' about him. Anyway, I'm sure obliged to yuh, stranger; it saved me from killin' him."

Pecos said, "Mr. Sillman, I'd like to have yuh meet Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens. Boys, Mr. Sillman used to once be a United States deputy marshal and a Texas Ranger."

The crippled man shook hands with

them and said, "I've only been here a few months, gentlemen. Wanted a nice, quiet place to take a rest. I am mighty glad to meet you both."

"I reckon you could have handled the thing yourself, Mr. Sillman," said Hashknife.

"In a messy way—yeah," admitted the elderly man. "Yore way was best—and I'm much obliged."

"Yo're sure welcome. It ain't often that yuh get a chance to help an ex-Ranger."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy left the saloon and went back to the hotel. Red Wells was very quiet.

"Do you think Pete Gonyer pulled out of the country?" said Sleepy.

Hashknife smiled slowly and shook his head. "He was quite scared, when he first seen me, but he was a cornered wolf, that's all. Pete's a bad-boy—all over—from his belt buckle both ways. But I don't believe he is pullin' out of Tumblin' Moon."

They were getting ready for bed, when someone knocked quietly on their door. Both men drew their guns, covering the door. At Hashknife's "Come in," Jim Sillman opened the door and entered. He glanced at the shade-covered windows, nodded approvingly and came into the room.

"I kinda expected yuh," said Hashknife. "Bob Marsh told me that you was doin' a little work for him, but I didn't know who yuh was, until Pecos introduced us. Set down and talk about it."

"I've been here two mighty long months," said Sillman quietly, "and I don't know a blamed thing more now than I did when I came here. The cattlemen of Tumblin' Moon don't talk, Hartley."

"They're scared of each other," said Hashknife.

"That's right. Every blamed one of 'em resigned from the association, and never gave a reason. Bob asked me to find that reason, but I must admit that I haven't; not even a hint. Didn't Bob tell you that I was here?"

"We haven't heard from Bob for over six months," replied Sleepy, "and it'll suit me awful well if we never do again."

"You just happened to drift into Tumblin' Moon?"

"That's right," nodded Hashknife. "Tell me somethin' about what happened over at the Black Hawk tonight—before we showed up."

Jim Sillman smiled. "Hartley, I've been trailin' trouble most all my life, but that was the most deliberate attempt to gun me

down I've ever seen. Pete went off half-cocked, after tryin' to make trouble. I got sore and went for a showdown. Pete deliberately stole a card, and I called him. That's when you came in. I don't pack a gun in sight, but I had plenty in my hand—below the table."

HASHKNIFE nodded. "Looks like they'd spotted yuh, pardner."

"I think it's just a suspicion, because I've been awful careful. There hasn't been a thing to connect Pete with the trouble, until his attempt to shoot me tonight. He wasn't drunk. I never had anythin' to say to him, but he started belittlin' the Rangers. Said they wouldn't attack a rabbit, unless they were in a gang. You know, things like that—and worse. When I didn't come back at him, he stole a card. It was clumsy and deliberate—with only two of us in the pot."

"What sort of a man is Bat Keene, Sillman?"

"Fine. He's gruff and hard, but I think he's square. In fact, I can't point a finger of suspicion at any man in the country, because we don't know what happened to 'em. They're scared, Hashknife—but what they're scared at—nobody seems to know."

"It's a funny deal," mused Hashknife. "They tell me that Tom Fallon was tied to a tree and badly beaten by somebody. Archer's trainload of steers was deliberately wrecked and forty head killed, Con Weaver, the sheriff, blasted down near the depot. Now, they tried to kill Amos Black. Oh, yes, a water-hole on the TJ spread was loaded with poison, and cattle killed. The cattlemen won't talk—not even the ones that have suffered."

"And every darned one of 'em resigned from the association," added Jim Sillman. "It's fear, Hashknife—fear of somethin' or somebody. I drew pay from the association for a month. I told Marsh that I couldn't find out a thing and he said to drop it. But I stayed on my own, because I hate to admit that I'm whipped."

"And the cowmen won't sell cows," added Sleepy.

"That's right," agreed Sillman. "I've talked to buyers. They don't know what it's all about. Prices don't make any difference; they won't even talk a deal. Why, damn it, Hashknife, they won't even talk with each other."

"I don't know what it's all about," said Sleepy, "but, after what happened tonight, you better keep yore back against a wall. They don't want law-men nor ex-law-men down here, it seems."

Hashknife grinned slowly. "Mebbe it's a good thing. One way to uncover dirty work is to make 'em scared enough to show their hand."

"If yuh live through it," amended Sleepy.

"That always is worth considerin'," said Jim Sillman.

JACK CONLEY stayed with Jean that afternoon, while Doctor Miles went to town. Amos Black was recovering fast, but Jean hesitated at staying alone with him. He was able to take a little nourishment, but talked little. Doctor Miles came back about dark, and Jack went to town.

Jean cooked supper for the doctor, who said he would stay all night and they were sitting in the main room about eight o'clock, when someone knocked on the door.

Jean answered the knock, and backed away quickly, as a masked man stepped in, a gun leveled in his right hand.

Doctor Miles started to get up, but at a growled order sat down quickly. Jean was frightened.

"I want both of yuh to go ahead of me to where Black is," ordered the intruder harshly.

"You—you wouldn't dare harm a—wounded man," faltered Jean.

"I ain't goin' to hurt nobody, unless I have to," he said.

The doctor led the way to the bedroom. Black was awake and stared at the masked man, who said:

"Well, have yuh got it, Black—or do we finish the job?"

"Under my pillow, Jean—the envelope," whispered Black.

Jean reached under the pillow and drew out a heavy manila envelope, stuffed full and sealed. She handed it to the masked man, who backed out of the room, watching them like a cat watching a mouse, and went swiftly outside. A moment later they heard hoofbeats, as the man rode away.

Jean sank down in the chair, staring at her father, whose eyes were closed.

"It's all right, Jean," he muttered. "It's better to forget it than to suffer."

The doctor touched her on the arm and they went out, closing the door behind them.

"He wants both of us to forget it, Jean," the doctor said as they sat down in their former chairs.

"But the whole thing is fantastic," she said. "A masked man, with a gun—and an envelope under my father's pillow. What does it all mean, Doctor?"

"I give you my word, I don't know, Jean."

"You don't? Where did that envelope come from, Doctor Miles?"

"I am not at liberty to say, Jean. I gave my word to your father. But as to what it all means—I do not know."

"I wish Jack had been here."

"Don't wish that," he said quietly. "It is possibly better that he doesn't know. He has been warned, you know."

"I know he has, but—Doctor, it is unthinkable that some man or men can intimidate this whole country. You know that is a fact."

Doctor Miles nodded slowly. "I believe it is a fact," he said.

"Have they tried to intimidate you?" she asked.

"No, they haven't. After all, folks don't have to intimidate a doctor, my dear."

JACK CONLEY rode out early next morning to the Rocking B, and Jean told him about the masked man: "Doctor Miles didn't want me to tell you, because you had been warned to mind your own business. But I thought you ought to know."

"I'm glad yuh told me, Jean," he said. "Can't yuh describe him—or his voice—or anythin' about him?"

Jean shook her head. "He looked just like anybody else—except for the mask—and that big gun."

Jack found Hashknife and Sleepy in a little restaurant, and told them about it. Jack had no idea why the masked man came to the Rocking B, nor what he took away.

"Jean told me," explained Jack, "that the masked man said to Amos Black, 'Well, have you got it, Black—or do we finish the job?' "

"And he got an envelope, eh?" remarked Hashknife thoughtfully.

"Full of somethin'," added Jack. "Jean don't know where it came from, unless Doctor Miles brought it from town and gave it to him."

Hashknife had no comments to make. Jim Sillman came in with Bat Keene and took a table near the front. Jack went out and when Hashknife and Sleepy paid their bill and started for the door, Sillman called them.

"You've met Bat Keene, haven't you?" asked Sillman.

"Yeah, we met him in the sheriff's office," said Hashknife.

"That's right," nodded Keene. "I hear you had a run-in with one of my cowpokes last night, Hartley. I'm sorry about that. Yuh see, I didn't have any idea what sort of a person Pete was. He didn't come home last night; so I reckon he high-tailed it out of here."

Hashknife nodded. "I reckon so, Mr. Keene. Yuh see, I knew quite a lot about Pete Gonyer—and most of it was bad."

"He told me his name was Woods."

"Names didn't mean much to Pete," smiled Hashknife. "Yuh see, I didn't know who Jim Sillman was, and I thought Pete was pickin' on a helpless man. He went for his gun and bumped his hand; so I just smacked him a couple."

Keene laughed shortly. "He had it comin', Hartley. Are you boys lookin' for work? I'm shy one man now."

"No, we'll be driftin' along in a few days," replied Hashknife. "Much obliged for the offer, anyway. See yuh later."

Hashknife, Sleepy and Pecos rode out to the Diamond B late that afternoon, and were welcomed by Aunt Priscilla and Uncle Henry.

"I was hoping somebody would come out for supper," she told them. "You can't visit with a cowpoke, and me and Henry don't get much fun out of lookin' at each other. How's Amos Black?"

Hashknife told them about Black's condition, and what had happened at the Rocking B last night. They looked sharply at each other, but made no comments. They didn't even ask what might have been in

that envelope. Uncle Henry was an old-timer in the Tumbling Moon country, and regaled them with stories of earlier days.

It was a wonderful supper. Aunt Priscilla was a grand cook, and the three men only stopped when they were ashamed to ask for more. During supper, Sleepy asked innocently:

"Don't the folks of this country visit around? I heard that they don't even have dances any more in Red Wells."

"Got tired of dancin', I reckon," said Uncle Henry quietly, but did not look at any of them, as he said it. No one answered his question about the folks visiting around, and the subject was changed quickly.

As they rode back to Red Wells that night, Pecos said, "Yuh see what I meant? They won't talk. They wasn't interested in Amos Black. They didn't say that the law ort to git that masked man. It was jist the same when other things happen. Even when somebody put poison in the TJ water-hole and killed a lot of cows, nobody said anythin'. Ord'narily we'd have had indignation meetin's, and all that, 'cause poisonin' a water-hole is worse'n murder."

They stabled their horses at the feed-corral and Pecos went to the office, while Hashknife and Sleepy headed for the hotel. Across the street were the bright lights of the Black Hawk Saloon. As they reached the hotel doorway they saw Jim Sillman leave the saloon and start across the street. They recognized him by his walk.

He was almost halfway across the fairly narrow street, when a flash of light licked out from the corner of the saloon, and a shotgun blast broke the stillness. Jim Sillman crumpled up in the street.

A horse lurched out from the corner of the saloon, passing between the corner of the sidewalk and the end of the hitch-rack. The rider was cursing, trying to swing the frightened animal around, but the shotgun blast, evidently fired over the animal's head, had made it unmanageable. The man still had his shotgun, banging the barrels over the animal's head, trying to turn it.

Hashknife ran into the street and fired one shot at the rider, who dropped the shotgun and sagged over the horse's neck, just as the animal whirled and went back past the corner, disappearing in the darkness. Men were streaming out of the Black Hawk, and from other buildings, surrounding the crumpled figure in the street.

Pecos reached them just as Jack Conley galloped into town on his way from the Rocking B. Jim Sillman was dead, the back of his head filled with buckshot. Doctor Miles had ridden in with Jack, and took charge of the body. Hashknife picked up the shotgun the man had dropped, and they examined it in the sheriff's office. There was not a mark on it to indicate ownership. Even the numbers had been filed off. It was a double-barreled, cheap grade gun, with the barrels sawed off to about twenty-five inches. Both barrels had been fired, and the empty shells were old-fashioned brass hulls, which looked as though they had been reloaded many times. There was not a clue of any kind.

In the excitement and bad light, neither Hashknife nor Sleepy was sure of the color of the horse. Might have been a bay, brown, roan—or most any color. Jack Conley sat in his office chair and held his head in his hands, a thoroughly disconcerted sheriff.

It was an hour or so before Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the hotel. Mike Stranahan, the hotel keeper, met them in the little lobby. He was quite upset over the killing of Jim Sillman.

"I never met a finer man," he declared. "He's been with me two months, and I liked him like a brother. Somethin' should be done to stop these things. By the way, I found a letter behind me counter a while ago. I don't know where it came from. No stamp on it. Maybe I walked on it a bit, I dunno. It's to the two of ye."

HASHKNIFE thanked him and put the soiled envelope in his pocket.

"Ye have no idea who shot him?" queried Mike.

"A man on a horse," replied Hashknife. "That's all we know."

"Well, that's something—I never heard about the horse before."

They went up to their room. There were no keys to the door, and it was quite dark in the hall. Hashknife sprawled flat on the floor, and Sleepy reached around and flung the door open. Nothing happened. Then they went in and lighted the lamp. Hashknife holstered his gun, and opened the letter. It was just a single sheet of

cheap paper, on which had been printed in pencil, in badly formed capitals:

YOU HAVE UNTIL DAYLIGHT TO LEAVE THE TUMBLING MOON RANGE.

It was unsigned. They looked at each other across the lamp.

"So they've made a deadline, eh?" remarked Sleepy quietly.

Hashknife nodded soberly. "I wonder if they warned Jim Sillman."

"Quien sabe?"

"Daylight," mused Hashknife aloud. "They don't give us much time."

He studied the penciled note again, his brow furrowed. Then he burned it over the flame of the lamp.

"That answer suits me," said Sleepy, and propped the back of a chair under the doorknob.

Hashknife smiled slowly. "Yuh know, Sleepy, I'd bet a dollar against a dried-out doughnut that the man who shot Sillman is nursin' a hunk of lead in his carcass."

"Didja hit him?" asked Sleepy anxiously.

"He dropped his shotgun and grabbed for the mane."

"Good! If yuh did, it might change their plans for us. And we've got their shotgun. Lookin' at it from my angle, we ain't done bad."

"Don't get optimistic," warned Hashknife. "Graveyards are full of folks who depended on luck alone."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy went to breakfast next morning, taking Pecos with them. Jack Conley was at the office, looking rather weary over the situation. He said that Doctor Miles had just driven away, going out to the Rocking B.

"I'm ridin' out pretty soon," he told them. "Why not go out with me? Jean would like to see you both."

"Maybe we will," said Hashknife. "See yuh after breakfast."

Pecos was a bit worried about Jack Conley.

"The kid is talkin' to himself," he said. "When yuh git like that, they either put yuh in the loco-lodge or give yuh a job herdin' sheep. He says he's ready to resign, but I don't want him to do that. They might ask me to take the job—and I don't want it."

"Not the way they act around here," said Sleepy. "I've had goose-pimples so bad I can't put on m' clothes. I don't like buckshot."

Pecos shuddered and shook his head. "Poor Jim Sillman had six in the back of his head. Never knowed what hit him. He got the same dose that Con Weaver got. Maybe it was the same shotgun, I dunno."

They ate breakfast, and saddled their horses. Pecos had to stay at the office. Jack Conley was very quiet. It was a bad situation for a young sheriff. Hashknife asked him if the commissioners had demanded more action from his office, but he shook his head.

"Three of 'em are Frank Harper, Tom Fallon and Al Trent, all cowmen; and cowmen ain't demandin' anythin'."

"Then they won't throw yuh out of office," said Sleepy.

"I wish they would, Sleepy—I'd sleep better at night."

"I dunno about that. I'm not an officer—and I don't sleep."

"Yuh mean—yuh don't sleep standin' up," corrected Hashknife. "If you've ever had a bad night-sleep, I never knew it."

"You plumb ruin m' sympathy," sighed Sleepy.

"Well, I'm glad Amos Black is gettin' well," said Jack. "I know it ain't the sheriff's place to act as nurse, but Jean didn't have anybody. A few months ago there'd been a dozen women for the job—and glad to do it. This situation gives me a hollow feelin' in my equator, Hashknife. Why did they kill Jim Sillman? Was he a detective?"

"He was for a while," said Hashknife, "but he hasn't been for a month or so. Maybe somebody thought he was, because he used to be a peace officer. As far as that goes, why did they shoot Con Weaver?"

"I don't know, Hashknife. I was out at the Rockin' B that night, and I don't know how it happened. Somebody heard the shot, and they found him. Maybe he found out somethin'—but we'll never know."

"Never is a long, long time, Jack," said Hashknife.

They were riding slowly along the road to the Rocking B, when Hashknife sudden-

ly drew up his horse, and stood up in his stirrups. Off to the left of the road, almost concealed in the mesquite, was a horse and buggy. The horse wasn't even tied—just headed into a clump of brush.

"Why, that's Doc Miles' rig!" exclaimed Jack. "What's goin' on here, anyway?"

They dismounted and examined the horse and buggy. Nothing had been injured. The tracks in the sand showed that the horse had been driven carefully off the road. But the doctor was missing and so was his black bag, in which he carried the tools of his profession. Near the buggy were the tracks of at least two shod horses.

"Now what in the devil happened to Doc?" asked Jack anxiously.

"He's missin'," said Sleepy vaguely. "Great country—this Tumblin' Moon, Jack."

"But why would anybody—Doc don't raise cows, Hashknife."

"I reckon we might as well ride out to the Black place," said the tall, gray-eyed cowboy quietly. "Maybe we better tie the horse, before we go. Doc might come back, yuh know."

"Have you got any idea what happened to him?" asked Jack.

"All I've seen is horse-tracks in the sand. Somebody met him and maybe forced him to drive off the road. They were in such a hurry they didn't even take time to tie the horse. Are there any other doctors in this country, Jack?"

"Doc Miles is the only one. Everybody uses Doc Miles."

"Even the owl-hoots," said Hashknife dryly. "Let's go."

Jean was waiting for them on the front porch, and she seemed concerned over the doctor.

"Dad is worse," she told Jack. "His fever came up a while ago, and he has been rambling in his talk. Doctor Miles should be here."

Jack said, "Honey, hang onto yore nerve—somethin' has happened to Doc Miles. His horse and buggy are down along the road—but he's gone."

"Gone? Jack, what do you mean? He isn't——"

"He ain't dead. I mean, we hope he ain't. He's just missin'."

"You mean—they got him, Jack?"

"I—I don't know what happened, Honey. Wherever he went, he took his bag with him. We don't know just why, but I'm sure he didn't go willingly."

"And he said," remarked Jean, "that a doctor doesn't have to be intimidated."

They went in to look at the patient, who was mumbling brokenly:

"I won't pay—half my money—they're killers. . . ."

HASHKNIFE listened intently. The old man moved restlessly.

"Can't talk," he muttered. "We don't know—who——"

"His fever ain't too bad," said Hashknife. "I don't think yuh should worry too much. Maybe Doc will be along after awhile."

"I've got to go back," said Jack miserably. "I've got to hold an inquest today, and I've got to try and find out who to notify about Jim Sillman. Jean, I forgot to tell you—they killed Jim Sillman last night in Red Wells."

Jean looked at them blankly. "Why did they kill him?" she asked.

"Nobody knows."

"Doc Miles is the coroner," reminded Hashknife. "You've got to have him for the inquest, Jack."

"That's right—I forgot about that."

"They don't play favorites," smiled Hashknife. "Me and Sleepy got a note from them, warnin' us to be out of this country by daylight this mornin'."

"You did?" gasped Jack. "And you—you stayed?"

"What do you think?" queried Sleepy soberly.

"I reckon I'm half-locoed," sighed the sheriff.

Amos Black was breathing quietly, and the fever seemed to have diminished; so they all went out on the front porch.

"Why did they send you a warning note?" asked Jean.

Hashknife smiled slowly, "I reckon they're afraid of strangers," he replied. "Yuh see, Miss Jean, it's a fact that yuh can live so close to a thing that yuh never see it. A stranger might see things that the native wouldn't notice at all."

"Have you seen anything?" she asked curiously.

"Not yet—but I'm still lookin'. Maybe that's why they don't want us to stay here."

"But aren't you afraid?"

"Yes'm, we sure are."

"So petterfied we can't run," added Sleepy soberly.

THEY offered to stay there, while Jack went back to Red Wells. He was anxious to see if Doctor Miles had taken his horse and buggy—and knew all the time he hadn't. If he had, he'd be at the ranch. Jack rode away, promising to come back early in the afternoon.

Amos Black was sleeping quietly, and Jean came back to the porch.

"He seems much better," she said thankfully.

"It's a queer deal," remarked Hashknife. "I wonder what he meant about somebody takin' half of his money."

"I wish I knew," replied Jean. "Dad has had something on his mind for several months. He went around with his jaw set, and a determined expression in his eyes. Every time anyone came to the ranch, he was tense, and he wore a gun all the time. That wasn't like him. He rarely ever wore a gun, until a few months ago.

"Mr. Sillman came out here several times. I liked him, but Dad said he wished he'd stay away. He didn't say why, except that he didn't want to talk. He mentioned selling the Rocking B and moving away, but he didn't make any move to do it. Why, we used to have a lot of folks dropping in on us. All the ranchers were great hands to go visiting around—but they quit it. They

hardly speak to each other now. I hope Dad will sell out, when he gets well."

It was about the middle of the afternoon, when a lone rider came drifting in. Jane recognized him at a distance as Lon Rush, one of the AT cowboys, from Al Trent's ranch. Lon was a tall, skinny, buck-toothed cowboy. He grinned widely at Jean, as he dismounted.

Jean introduced him to Hashknife and Sleepy. Lon said:

"I was down thisaway, so I dropped in to see how yore pa was gettin' along."

"Well, he's getting better, Lon."

"That's good." Lon sat down and wiped his brow with his sleeve.

"Purty hot," he remarked. "How's everythin' else, Jean?"

"Well, about the same as ever, Lon. We haven't seen you for a long time. How are things at the AT?"

"Oh, 'bout middlin', I reckon. Al said to tell yore pa hello, if I seen him."

They talked for a while, and Jean went into the house. Hashknife said:

"I don't like to meddle in things, Rush; but what's wrong with Tumblin' Moon, anyway?"

"Wrong with Tumblin' Moon? Such as?"

"The shootin' of Amos Black—and the rest of the trouble. You heard that Jim Sillman got killed in Red Wells last night, didn't yuh?"

"Shucks, no! I ain't been there for a week. Somebody shot him?"

"On the street, between the Black Hawk and the hotel."

"Well, I'll be danged! Who'd shoot him, do yuh reckon?"

"Nobody knows."

Lon Rush shook his head. "I dunno what's wrong," he said. "Folks act queer these days, but nobody says anythin' about it. Mebbe they are scared to talk—scared of buckshot in the back, too."

"Maybe," nodded Hashknife. "They sent us a warnin' to leave."

Lon stared at Hashknife. "Sent you a warnin'? Why?"

"We don't know. It wasn't signed. Told us to be out of here by daylight this mornin'."

"Did, huh? Well—I dunno. If they sent me one—I'd be goin'. From what's done happened, I'd say they keep their word."

Jean came back and announced that her father was still asleep, and had no fever. Lon said:

"I reckon I'd better be driftin', Jean. I'm glad he's better. Tell him I dropped in, will yuh?"

"He will be pleased," she replied. Lon shook hands with Hashknife and Sleepy, climbed on his horse and rode away.

"Lon is a fine boy," said Jean.

"Seems like it," nodded Hashknife thoughtfully. "What sort of a feller is Al Trent?"

"Very nice," replied Jean. "He used to come over here quite often. Al is a bachelor, and his spread isn't very large, but he never has any complaints. I believe Lon is the only cowboy he has now."

"I've met Henry Bond and Bat Keene," said Hashknife.

"Uncle Henry is salt of the earth," declared Jean. "I like Bat Keene, too. His place is not much bigger than Trent's. He raises horses, mostly, like we do, but Uncle Henry works cattle."

Jack came back from Red Wells and told them that Doctor Miles' horse and buggy were still there, and he hadn't come home. Hashknife and Sleepy went back toward Red Wells, but discovered that the doctor's rig had been taken away. Tracks in the sand showed that the buggy had headed for Red Wells; so they galloped ahead, catching up with the vehicle about a mile from Red Wells.

THE good doctor was a bit wild-eyed, his hair touseled, and he was plainly nervous.

"What happened to yuh, Doc?" asked Hashknife.

"Everything, I suppose," he replied. "Two masked men stopped me this morning and forced me to leave my horse and buggy. They blindfolded me and put me on a horse. My gracious, I didn't know what to think. They took me for miles on that horse, and finally took me into a house.

"When they uncovered my eyes, there was a man, stretched out on a bed, naked to the waist. His head was covered, and one of the men was there to see that I didn't uncover his face. This man had been shot

in the right shoulder, and was unconscious. I give you my word, it was the strangest operation I ever did. I—I got the bullet.

"After I dressed the wound they put the cloth back over my eyes, and kept me there a long time. Then they led me out, put me on the horse and brought me back to the horse and buggy."

"Couldn't you identify any of the men?" asked Hashknife.

"Not one of the three. There were only three men, you know."

"Couldn't identify the house, eh?"

"I never saw the house—only the one room. It was a very odd experience. There was no conversation, except when they forced me off the road. One man said, 'Doc, you do what we say and you'll get back all right.' And in the house, the same man said, 'You're the doctor—you fix him up—and no foolin'.' "

"Quite an experience, Doc," remarked Hashknife. "You'll be goin' out to the Rockin' B this evenin'?"

"Just as soon as I can get another bag and more stuff. Yuh see, they kept my bag. Maybe they can handle the case now."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy rode on to Red Wells and stabled their horses.

"We've busted the deadline, partner—keep yore eyes open," said Hashknife. "They've been too busy with their cripple to bother with us—but they'll be tryin' to enforce their warnin'."

Things were very quiet around Red Wells. The only person to make any mention of Doctor Miles' experience was Mike Stranahan, the hotel keeper, and that was almost a whisper.

"Did ye hear about Doc Miles?" he asked.

Hashknife and Sleepy nodded, but said nothing. In their room, Hashknife sprawled on the bed, completely relaxed, trying to plan a move, trying to build something out of nothing. Sleepy smoked and watched from their front window. Somewhere there were men who knew that these two had ignored their written warning, and were planning to enforce it. Just what their move might be—who could tell?

They went to supper and sat with their backs to the wall, watching the front of the place. Pecos had gone out to the Rocking B. He said he was a hell of a chaperon, but better than none.

"Why bother, Pecos—Tumblin' Moon folks won't talk?" said Sleepy.

"I reckon yo're right, Sleepy—but we still have hopes."

THEY spent the early part of the evening at the Black Hawk. There was little activity in the place, less conversation. When they left, they went via the back door, circled around, crossed the street at a dark place and came in at the rear of the hotel. They went up the rear stairs, and down the dark hallway.

"It might be a good idea to take the next room, Sleepy—just in case," Hashknife whispered. "It ain't locked."

They opened the door to the adjoining room, and Hashknife suggested, "Yuh better draw the shades before we light the lamp."

It was very dark in there, only a faint glow of light in the two windows from across the street. Hashknife had closed the door.

Sleepy had started for the windows, when he gasped, "What the devil!"

And the battle started. It seemed to Hashknife that the room was full of men. Something struck him a glancing blow, but sufficient to throw him off balance. He crashed against the wall, and somebody else crashed a shoulder into him. The few pieces of furniture seemed to be bouncing around.

Hashknife was afraid to shoot for fear of hitting Sleepy. A man ripped out a painful sort of a curse. Hashknife seemed to be getting hit from every side, and wasn't able to do anything about it in the dark. He dived ahead, knocking somebody aside, and came up against a window. A chair splintered against the casing, part of it crashing through the window.

A body slammed into him, and Hashknife grabbed. They swayed and lurched, smashing out the window. Hashknife felt his grip tear loose, and he went over the sill, backwards. How he made the turn in mid-air, he never did know, but he landed on the sidewalk on his feet and tumbled into the street.

For several moments he was unable to catch his breath, but stumbled back to the

hotel entrance. The noise of the breaking window had attracted attention. Hashknife bumped into Mike Stranahan at the doorway, but shoved him aside and ran for the stairway.

Sleepy met him at the top of the stairs, his shirt almost torn from his body, a bloody scratch across his face, and one eye discoloring.

"Where'd they go?" panted Hashknife. Sleepy made vague gestures with both arms.

"Gone," he said huskily. "Did you fall out the window?"

"Yeah—partly. How many was there?"

"I—I didn't count 'em," replied Sleepy. "I had one of 'em down and was chewin' his arm, when one of 'em yelped, " 'Git out of here!' I let go of mine. He didn't taste very good, anyway. Whooee-e-e-e! Man, I shore had action!"

Men began to crowd into the hotel lobby, trying to find out what happened. Mike Stranahan didn't know. Hashknife and Sleepy went to their room, and some of the crowd came up there, but Hashknife and Sleepy met them, carrying their war-sacks.

"Are ye leavin'?" asked Mike.

"This hotel is too rough," replied Hashknife. "We came here to have peace and quiet—and look at Sleepy. You ought to be ashamed—runnin' a place like this. What do we owe yuh, Mike?"

Mike protested that he had nothing to do with it, but they paid their bill, and went over to get their horses. A few minutes later they rode out of Red Wells, their war-sacks tied on their saddles, while Mike Stranahan and some of the men examined the wrecked room.

A mile out of town, they cut back to the Rocking B road.

"Then we ain't pullin' out, eh?" queried Sleepy, visibly relieved.

"Did yuh think we were?" asked Hashknife.

"Well, you sounded awful convincin' at the hotel."

"I'm glad I did—it'll leave us in the clear for a while."

JEAN, Jack and Pecos were surprised to see them, and they stared at Sleepy's facial injuries. Hashknife limped a little, due to the drop to the street. They explained what happened in the hotel room, and that, outwardly, they had left Red Wells to its own troubles.

"I think that them coyotes was staked out in that room, waitin' to hear what we talked about," said Sleepy. "Then flimsy walls ain't soundproof. Man, we sure walked into trouble!"

"Somethin'," said Pecos, but without conviction, "has got to be done. This is gettin' worse every day."

"Suggest somethin', Pecos," said Hashknife.

"Me? I never had a idea in m' life."

"Neither have I," added Jack Conley. "I just get more mixed up all the time."

"Jack," said Hashknife soberly, "how much do you think of yore job? I mean, does it mean a lot to you?"

"No. Hashknife, I'd be glad to quit tonight."

"Make it tomorrow night."

Jack's ears pricked up quickly. Hashknife wasn't smiling—he was deadly serious, as he said quietly:

"I want yuh to do somethin' that might put yuh in bad—but if you don't care—Listen, pardner, it's a long-shot. Maybe yuh won't want to do it—I dunno."

"If it'll help clear up this situation—shoot."

"There's eight cattle spreads in this range," said Hashknife. "We can count out Amos Black. That leaves seven of 'em, pretty well scattered. Jack, can you deputize seven men tomorrow—men who ain't connected with any of the outfits?"

Jack looked quizzically at Hashknife, his mind working fast.

"I believe I can," he said. "Yeah, I can do it, Hashknife."

"All right. Get yore seven men tomorrow afternoon, givin' 'em time to get to the ranches about—well, before supper-time. Send a note to every cattle owner, demanding his appearance in Red Wells at, say, nine o'clock tomorrow evenin', to attend a cattlemen's meetin' at the dance-hall. Tell 'em it is absolutely necessary for them to be there. Make it strong, Jack—and don't let 'em back out."

Jack thought it over carefully. "I wonder if they'll come, Hashknife. You know how things have been. And what can I tell them, after they get there?"

"Jack," replied Hashknife seriously, "I

don't care what yuh tell 'em. Tell 'em the story of Little Bo Peep. All I want is to have the meetin'. Tell 'em that the whole future of the cattle industry hinges on that meetin'. Make it mysterious."

"But does it?" asked Jack.

"In my opinion—yes."

"Do it, Jack," said Jean. "Do anything to stop what has been going on."

"Don't be too sure it will," said Hashknife. "It's a shot in the dark, Jean—a long-shot, too. But long-shots have won—at times."

"Where do I fit into this?" asked Pecos. "I'm free, white and over twenty-one. If yuh need a extra gun-slinger—"

"You'll stay with us. No, wait! What's the nearest spread from Red Wells?"

"The AT," said Pecos. "Al Trent's outfit."

"All right, Jack—send Pecos out there. He'll make yore seventh man—and he can come here from his delivery."

"I'll do it," said Jack. "I'll do anythin', Hartley—and I don't care how long the shot is. It's time we did somethin', except wonder what's goin' on. I don't reckon you'd tell us what yuh have on yore mind, would yuh?"

"He won't," said Sleepy quickly. "He ain't even told me."

"Suits me. If you two are stayin' here, I'll go back to town. I suppose Mike Stranahan is lookin' for me to find the vandals that smashed up his furniture."

"Don't forget—you ain't seen us," warned Sleepy.

"I'll remember that, too," grinned Jack. "Yuh know, I feel better than I have since I went into office."

"Enjoy it while yuh can," said Hashknife soberly. "Maybe after tomorrow night, they'll hate yuh for makin' 'em ride in for nothin' at all."

"I'll take that chance, Hashknife. *Buenas noches.*"

"A couple of notches to you, son," grinned Sleepy.

HASHKNIFE went with Jean, when she fed her father. Amos Black was much better, but not inclined to talk. Hashknife asked him point-blank, "Why don't you tell me what you know? It might save lives."

"Not mine," whispered the old man. "And there's Jean, too."

"They'd harm her?"

"I can't talk, Hartley."

"I see. But you'd give a lot to stop things like this?"

"Every cent I own."

"As a matter of fact," said Hashknife, "you don't know who is behind all this."

"I do not, Hartley. It's a blind canyon."

"They take half of yore money, eh?"

Amos Black looked frightened, staring up at the lean-faced cowboy. "I—I didn't say that," he protested.

"Hashknife Hartley wants to help us, Dad," said Jean quietly.

"He can't, Jean; nobody can. We'll only be worse off than ever."

"Don't worry," smiled Hashknife. "It'll all come out in the wash. I believe that Movin' Finger is startin' to point."

Hashknife walked out into the other room. Amos Black looked up at his daughter. "Movin' finger? What's that, Jean?"

"I don't know—but I believe him, Dad."

The old man licked his dry lips. "I was afraid he'd ask too much, Jean. He looks at yuh—and yuh kinda feel—like tellin'. But I'm afraid. I—I hope he can do somethin'—but I don't see how."

Jean finished with her father, and came back to the main room, where the three men were talking. She listened for a while, but in a lull in the conversation asked, "Hashknife, what did you mean about the moving finger?"

"The finger that men call Fate, Jean," he replied.

"Do you believe in fate, Hashknife?"

"Yeah, I do. Somewhere in the Bible it says, 'The son of man goeth as it is written of him,' I dunno where it is, but I feel that it is right. Men call it fate. There's a big book somewhere—and all our names are there. When yore time comes—that movin' finger points to yore name. You can't dodge it. Bein' careful won't help. You can be as cautious as yuh please, and maybe you'll get satisfaction out of what you'd say was cheatin' death. No such a thing—it wasn't yore time."

"I never thought of it like that," said Jean.

"Don't," advised Sleepy. "You might take too many chances—like we do."

"But you are both alive."

"Sister, when yuh say that—cross yore fingers."

"Tell me honestly," said Jean, "why you came to Tumbling Moon?"

"It was on the other side of a hill."

"They tell me that," said Pecos. "They've always hankered to see the other side of a hill. Funny thing, I'd say."

"Everybody to their own taste, as the old woman said when she kissed a burro," laughed Hashknife. "We like it."

"What do you expect to find on the other side of a hill?" asked Jean.

"Somebody's trouble," replied Hashknife. "You'd be surprised how many folks have."

"Personally," said Pecos soberly, "I think yo're too lazy to work. That hill-climbin' idea is jist an alibi."

"Pardner," said Hashknife, just as soberly, "you can go to the head of the class."

"I'm smart," grinned Pecos. "Yuh can't fool me."

"I suppose yo're very observin', too, eh?" queried Hashknife.

"Yeah, I'd say I am, Tall Feller."

"I'll test yuh out, Pecos."

Hashknife drew a brass concho from his pocket. It was a little larger than a silver dollar. He handed it to Pecos.

"Who wears a concho like that on his chaps, Pecos?"

Pecos squinted at it closely in the lamplight. Jean looked at it, too, but made no comments.

"It ain't very gaudy, I'll say that much," said Pecos.

"Yo're observin', Pecos," said Hashknife. "Who wears 'em?"

"Somebody I know?"

"I reckon yuh do."

"Huh! Well, mebbe, but I'll say I don't know, Hashknife. Who?"

"I'll keep yuh guessin' a while," smiled Hashknife.

"Aw, I'll betcha it's somethin' yuh carry for a good-luck piece."

"Good luck? Pecos, I'll let yuh know later. Let's go to bed."

PECOS came back from Red Wells about five o'clock next afternoon. Doctor Miles had been out, but didn't see Hashknife and Sleepy. Hashknife told Jean, "We've left Tumblin' Moon—and we don't want even a doctor to think different. Jack didn't come out to the Rocking B. Amos Black was much better and Jean was not afraid to be alone with him for a while."

Pecos said, "Jack got six more riders, and I reckon everybody is wonderin' what the meetin' is all about. Jack does, too. I went out to the AT, but Lon Rush was the only one there. He said that Trent went to Antelope Wells this mornin', and won't be back for a day or two. Lon said he'd rep for the AT at the meetin', if it was all right with Jack. I told Jack and he didn't know what to say, but it will have to be all right."

"Sure—that's all right," said Hashknife. "Just so the outfit is represented. I hope Jack ain't worried too much."

Pecos laughed. "He's actin' like a kid on the night before Christmas. Yo're Sandy Claus, an' he ain't sure whether he believes in yuh or not."

"Well," said Hashknife, soberly, "I ain't sure that I believe in myself, Pecos."

They saddled their horses at dark, and rode away from the Rocking B. Neither Sleepy nor Pecos had the slightest idea where Hashknife would take them, until he said, "Pecos, yo're the guide. Take us on the road to the AT."

"That's easy, Hashknife. Any special spot?"

"Where we can see the road, and not be seen."

Pecos selected a spot about a mile from the ranchhouse—a little mesa above the road, and a good place to conceal their horses.

"What do yuh expect to find out from here?" asked Pecos.

"I want to see who goes to town, Pecos."

"There's six other outfits goin' in tonight."

"This'n suits me pretty good—if yuh don't mind."

"Not me—I'm past mindin' anythin'."

It was about eight o'clock when a lone rider came along, heading for Red Wells. The light was not very good, but Pecos declared it was Lon Rush. They got on their horses and went onto the AT ranchhouse, a sprawling, part adobe, part frame building, almost hidden in a grove of trees. A series of corrals sprawled down the slope.

They dismounted down by the corrals.

There was a light in the ranchhouse window, and Pecos said:

"That's kinda funny for Lon to go to town and leave a lamp burnin'."

"Maybe," suggested Sleepy, "he's scared to go into a dark house."

Hashknife had no comments, as he led the way cautiously toward the lighted window. It was partly covered, but they were able to get a good view of the interior of the main room. A man was seated at a table, writing. The one lamp was at his elbow.

"That's Pete Gonyer!" whispered Sleepy.

"It shore is!" murmured Pecos. "Shucks, I didn't know he had brains enough to dip ink on a pen. Writin', ain't he?"

"Seems to be," breathed Hashknife. "Things are workin' all right. We can't go through the door, 'cause that coyote will bite. Get back a little and give me room."

Hashknife sagged in against the window and slashed out a whole pane of glass with his six-shooter. The crash and the falling glass caused Pete to jerk upright. The lamp almost upset, when Pete jarred the table.

"Don't move, Pete! We've got yuh trapped!" rasped Hashknife.

But Pete did move. He drew his gun and upset the table, all in the one motion, plunging the room into darkness. He fired one shot, smashing an upper pane, and Hashknife fired at the flash. Sleepy and Pecos ran to the two doors, trying to prevent Pete from getting away.

They evidently had Pete trapped, but the problem was—how to get him out of the trap. There was not a sound in the house. Hashknife went prowling around the other side, halted sharply and thought he was seeing things. Twenty feet away was a fence and a patch of brush. As Hashknife looked toward a faint sound, he saw a man come up against the fence, as though coming up through the earth.

The man stood there for several moments, and then tried to climb the fence, but didn't seem able to do it. Hashknife walked closer, gun in hand. The man got up on the fence, but fell back into the bushes. Hashknife ran over there.

It was Pete Gonyer, sprawled on his back. He was unarmed, unconscious, it seemed. Hashknife called for Pecos and Sleepy, who came running. They lighted matches and looked him over. One of his legs dangled into a hole, big enough for a man to crawl down.

"You hit him pretty hard, Hashknife," said Pecos. "But how in the devil did he get out here?"

"It looks as though they had a getaway tunnel," said Hashknife. "Prob'ly in the cellar. He made it this far, but wasn't able to go any further. C'mon."

They trotted back to the house. The front door was locked, but they crashed it open. Al Trent was in bed, all bandaged up, his face the color of old ashes. He didn't say a word—just stared ahead. Hashknife went to the table, carrying a lighted match, and found a candle in the neck of a beer-bottle. The ink-bottle had upset on the floor, and the place reeked of kerosene from the broken lamp.

Hashknife picked up the scattered envelopes and sheets of paper. There were envelopes already addressed to the cattlemen of the Tumbling Moon. A partly written letter read:

> Dear Member:
>
> By now you must realize that the League can handle any situation vital to our security. Jim Sillman was a detective, so we——

"Take a look at this one!" exclaimed Sleepy. "This'n *is* somethin'!"

The letter, undated, read:

> Dear Member:
>
> At a recent meeting you were elected to membership in the Cattlemen's Protective League, pledged to live up to the laws of the organization. Our unseen operatives will see that you have every protection. In return you will pay the League fifty percent of your gross sales.
>
> Following your receipt of money on any sales, you will hold the League's share to await the arrival of our collector. We advise that you do not discuss the League with anyone, pay promptly, when called upon to do so, and do nothing to cause trouble for the organization.
>
> You will, at once, terminate your membership with the Cattleman's Association, answer no questions, merely inform them that you do not wish to remain in their organization. The C. P. L. is pow-

erful enough to protect its faithful members, and powerful enough to punish any offending member. In case we are obliged to punish, the one word RUSTLER will indicate our actions.

Talk to no one about this, do nothing to displease the C. P. L., and your interests will be protected. This is an order.

We are sure you will appreciate the protection afforded by your organization, and it is with pleasure that we accept you to membership.

Membership Committee,
C. P. L.

Hashknife read it aloud by the candlelight, folded the letter and put it in his pocket.

"What the devil does that letter mean?" asked Pecos.

"Plenty," replied Hashknife grimly. "C'mon, we've got to get to Red Wells."

"What about Pete Gonyer?"

"He'll keep—I hope."

JACK CONLEY was not only getting embarrassed, but he was worried. The cattlemen were all in town, and the meeting was almost due to start. They were acting like a lot of strangers, not discussing the meeting, but just waiting and wondering to themselves. Everyone else around Red Wells was wondering, too.

Jack Conley counted them, as they filed into the big dance-hall, where seven chairs had been placed near the platform. It was just past nine o'clock, and Jack had to do something. The men were all looking blankly at him. They were all sitting on one row, with Bat Keene on one end, Uncle Henry Bond on the other. Between them were Terry Jones, Frank Harper, Lou Archer, Tom Fallon and Lon Rush. All ranchers, except Lon Rush, who said:

"Al Trent is in Antelope Wells and won't be back, so I'll rep for the AT."

"That's all right, Lon," nodded the sheriff.

Slowly the sheriff got up on the platform and faced the cold-eyed seven. He didn't know what to say, but he realized that he must say something.

"Gentlemen," he said slowly, "I called this meetin' to discuss what has been goin' on around here for the last few months. Men have been beaten, others murdered, trains wrecked, cattle poisoned. Dr. Miles was kidnaped to treat a wounded man.

"As sheriff of this county, I demanded a meeting of you men to see if we can't get to the bottom of this thing. Bat Keene, what do you know about it?"

"Nothin'," replied Bat quietly.

"You—Uncle Henry?"

"Nothin'," replied Uncle Henry coldly.

One by one Jack asked them for an opinion, but got nowhere.

"If this is all yuh wanted, I'm sorry I came," said Lou Archer.

"And they wrecked yore train-load of cows," said Jack. "Fallon, they tied you to a tree and beat yuh."

Fallon shrugged his shoulders and stared at the floor. Through the open window came the sound of galloping horses down the street. It gave Jack Conley a lift.

"You're a fine bunch! If yuh wasn't yellow—" he blazed.

"Who's yellow?" demanded Bat Keene, getting to his feet. "We didn't come here to be insulted by a sheriff that ain't dry behind the ears yet."

There were footsteps on the stairs, the clattering of spurs. The men looked at each other. This meeting was for the cattlemen, and they were all present.

Then the door was flung wide and in came Hashknife, Sleepy and Pecos. The cattlemen were getting to their feet, as the three men came down the floor. Hashknife halted a few feet away, his face shaded with his big hat, his right hand dangling close to the butt of his holstered Colt.

"This ain't no open meetin'," said Tom Fallon. "What's the idea?"

Sleepy and Pecos moved on, taking advantageous positions, their eyes on the seven men. Jack Conley hunched forward on the platform.

"It ain't an open meetin', gents," agreed Hashknife quietly, "but it's due to open. Yuh see, Pete Gonyer died at the entrance to the burrow at the AT—and we got his unfinished letter. Then—Al Trent *had* to talk."

Not a man moved a muscle—they just stared at Hashknife, whose eyes, hidden in the shade, searched the faces of the seven.

"Trent knew the game was up," said Hashknife evenly, "and he knew we had the

deadwood on the guilty men. Keep yore hands in sight, Lon!"

Lon didn't make the break—it was Bat Keene. He couldn't stand the pressure any longer. He leaped back against the platform, gun swinging high, putting the others between him and Hashknife, but he forgot Jack Conley, who leaped on his back, and they went down in a heap. Lon Rush went into action, but someone bumped him, and his bullet smashed into the ceiling. Another gun thundered, and Lon fell backwards over an upset chair.

"That'll make a good boy out of you, feller!" rasped Pecos.

Hashknife and Sleepy dived to Jack's assistance and subdued the raving Bat Keene. He was quickly handcuffed and dumped into a chair, where he mouthed profanity at everyone.

"Heavenly days, what's this all about?" asked Uncle Henry.

"It's a lie, I tell yuh!" wailed Bat Keene. "I never done anythin'! Prove it, you long-legged coyote!" he screamed at Hashknife. "Yo're a liar—and you know it!"

Hashknife laughed at him. "You proved it, Keene—when you went for yore gun. I was sure of Lon Rush, but I didn't know who else. I suspected you, because Pete was with yuh—and Pete always was a bad boy. Gentlemen—"

Hashknife backed up a little. "Gentlemen, this little game was concocted by Bat Keene, Al Trent, Lon Rush and Pete Gonyer. It was a pretty desperate game, but it was workin'. I figured Pete would be in a bad deal; so I tabbed him. I knew he wouldn't leave this country. The rest was kinda hard to figure, until Lon Rush made a remark at the Rockin' B. We talked about Jim Sillman gettin' murdered. Lon' didn't know about it—and I didn't tell how he was killed. But Lon said, 'Maybe other folks was scared they'd get a load of buckshot, *too.*' Lon knew how Sillman was killed.

"Last night when we had that battle up in the hotel room, I ended up in the street with a brass concho in my hand. I tore it off a man's chaps. It'll match the ones on Lon's chaps. Keene, you'll hang for the murder of Sillman. Trent told us—"

"He lied!" screamed Keene. "Trent shot him."

"Thanks. I shot Trent, after he shot Sillman. Gentlemen, I reckon that's the story. The Cattlemen's Protective League is busted. You can talk to each other now—and not get a rustler's sign for it."

The cattlemen didn't know what to say. The end of their worries and suspicions left them rather weak-kneed.

"Hashknife, what can we say?" asked Uncle Henry. "I want to throw my hat into the air and yip my fool head off—but I can't talk sense."

"You sure saved my bacon," grinned Jack. "Pecos! Help me get this pole-cat into jail—I've got to see Amos Black!"

"We can leave Lon Rush for the coroner," said Pecos.

The men filed out quietly. Hashknife and Sleepy went out to the horses and waited for Jack Conley. They had to go to the Rocking B to get their war-sacks. Pecos came first. He got his horse at the rack.

"I've got to get Doc Miles and head for the AT," he said. "We've got to try and save Al Trent for the other end of that rope."

Jack Conley came, and they rode out of town.

"Them cowmen are so stunned they forgot to thank yuh," said Jack.

"That's all right, Jack—it wasn't anythin'."

"It wasn't? My God, you saved the Tumblin' Moon—that's all."

"Well," chuckled Hashknife, "I was shootin' at the moon. All I had was a slip of the tongue and a brass concho. Jack, what's on the other side of them tall hills, west of here?"

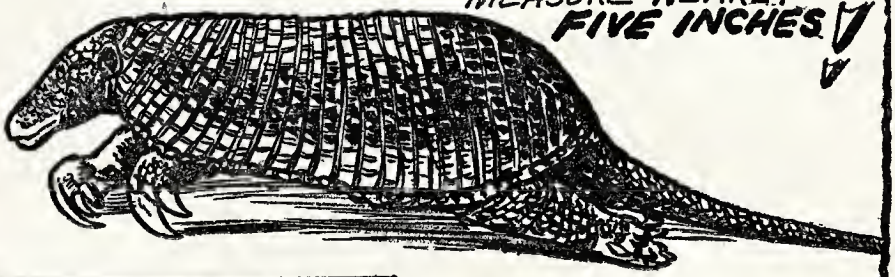
"Over there? Huh! Well, I don't exactly know much about that country over there. Never gave it any thought."

"Well, you think about it," said Sleepy soberly. "If we ever come back here, we'll tell yuh all about it."

And while Jack ran to the ranchhouse to tell Jean and her father, they got their war-sacks from the stable, tied them on their saddles and headed west. And when the jubilant couple came searching for them, they were far off across the starlit hills, heading west. There was no more trouble in Tumbling Moon—and they didn't care especially for peace.

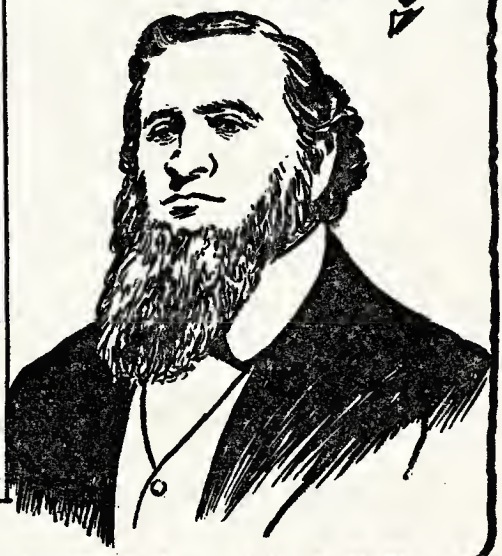
Curioddities By Weill

THE GIANT ARMADILLO OF SOUTH AMERICA HAS A LONG TONGUE COVERED WITH AT LEAST **250,000 MINUTE TEETH!** IT IS ABOUT FOUR FEET LONG AND ITS HUGE CLAWS *MEASURE NEARLY* ***FIVE INCHES!***



THE SWEET PEA IS NATIVE TO THE ISLAND OF SICILY AND ITS SEEDS BECAME AN ARTICLE OF COMMERCE *AS EARLY AS* ***1724!***

BRIGHAM YOUNG IS REPUTED TO HAVE LEFT **$1,000,000!** HE HAD **19 WIVES** AND WAS THE FATHER OF **57 CHILDREN!**



Washed Up, Out or How, Suddenly There Was Plenty Doing for Old Tom Ball

One Mistake Per Man

By ANDREW A. CAFFREY

Author of "Priority on Grief," etc.

OLD Tom Ball had fought a pretty good aerial war when he was young Tom Ball—back there in '17 and '18 when the men had all the metal and the ships all the wood. But old Tom Ball was just an airlines wheelhorse when war began to break out all over, along toward year's end in 1939. Being an airlines chief pilot, "Colonel" Tom Ball was, of course, right where anything might happen to him. But he was still willing to bet that it wouldn't. Truth was old Tom felt sort of washed-up, sort of back-numbered. In fact, he had long since begun to guess that, at forty-eight, he was none too hot. Tough as it was to admit—this to himself and never to the airlines medical checkers—old Tom had begun to reach that snoozing age, that spot in a mellow man's slowing-up where he likes to snatch his forty-odd winks, say when a plane is making a five- or six-hour hop and there's nothing much doing.

All of a sudden, though, there was plenty doing for old Tom Ball. Certain gents in Washington began to remind him that the "Colonel" thing wasn't exactly window-dressing. He was actually a colonel in Air

Forces reserves. He could be had—if Air Forces should suddenly start reaching. He might be called—if Air Forces should get a queer idea some fine day. Anyway, some of the top gents in Air Forces, just happening to meet old Tom here and there, began to suggest that he "get aboard" with one of the airplane makers.

"What the devil, Tom," the Washington voices began to say, "you don't want to be spending your time riding back and forth across the country safely seated with dizzy civilians and beautiful hostesses. . . . Haven't you heard that the beautiful hostesses are all going to join up and fly with the Wasps?"

"Well, that does it," old Tom Ball agreed. "After all, I'm not so ancient that the beautiful airline gals can outfly me."

So that's how come Colonel Tom Ball one day reached full bloom in the new capacity of Vice-President in Charge of Sales, and Chief Test Pilot for East-West Aircraft Company. And when the boys on any of the Air Forces fields visited asked him about that long title he explained it as meaning: "I'm just one more ferry pilot. I pick 'em up at both the West Coast and Middle West factory fields and hop 'em east and north to Botwood, Newfoundland. So if you see another shaggy old mut coming down the line with a keg under his chin, you'll know it's just old Tom Ball walking in from Newfoundland. Yes, sir, I'm in the war. And, brothers, is this war getting close to you proud Yanks."

East-West Aircraft Company, at the time, was turning out the two-engined Blenheim bombers in all its factories. And as they were when Colonel Tom Ball set them down on the Botwood airdrome, well they weren't too much. That is, they were pretty well stripped of all armament—or better, denied of all armament, for the factory had never installed any. Only the two top machine-guns—the pair firing forward—rode out with those bombers when they hopped off for the long transatlantic hop, all other weight-carrying being allotted to fuel. Somehow or other, old Tom Ball always felt guilty about turning over a nearly stripped ship to those kids who must ferry them east. Those so-willing, patriotically hopped up English and American kids who would have been willing to make the same flight on a kitchen table equipped with electric fans—if such a ferrying would only get something across that pond for the Battle of Britain.

Well, the kids could have it. They were welcome. Much as he liked air work, Tom Ball was too old a hand in the game to fancy that Atlantic crossing. That was all wet. It was deep. A man could get himself done away with out there, out there beyond and below those Newfoundland fogs. What's more, Colonel Tom Ball knew only too well that many, many of the red-hot young fellers weren't making it. He had it pretty straight that they were carpeting the bottom of the North Atlantic with costly long-and-wide airplane wings. It was too bad, but perhaps none of his worry. After all, he was making his deliveries. That was his job. He couldn't be expected to spend too much time weeping for kids who might go down. Kids had always gone down in this flying game. And they'd continue to go down just so long as game guys would go up. Didn't he know all about that? Hadn't he been a brave young guy himself—once upon a time? And, anyway, they weren't his kids. He had never married, so he didn't have any kids. Why, he didn't even know any of these hot squirts.

BOTWOOD base was big and getting bigger. Colonel Tom Ball saw it all each time he came into or flew away—the latter when some southbound ship gave him a south or westward ferry. However, Tom Ball had never taken the time to see Botwood in its entirety. He kept promising himself that he'd take a layover and get a good view of the place. Time and again, the English and Canadian officers had offered to show him the works. A vice-president in charge of sales should see all that was to be seen, say nothing of a chief test pilot for such an important plane builder as East-West Aircraft.

Now and then, coming in on the tower's careful instruction, Pilot Tom Ball was requested to spot his ferry down afront the large Instruments Installation hangar. That meant that the bomber he was bringing in was to be equipped as a shepherd plane. It would be equipped with the very best available in navigation instruments, radios, compasses, etc. Then, when the next eastbound flight should be made up, this

bomber would get the very best in radio-man and navigator and lead the more or less defenseless, long-chance-taking flight across the big pond. And none of those following bombers would have more than the front guns and inter-plane radio.

Early one cold wintry morning when Tom Ball set one down and rolled it to a stop out front of Instruments Installation, he decided that this would be a swell time to goldbrick for a few hours and do some sightseeing. It was on a day when Botwood was up to its Adam's apple in work, too. He had held off—on orders from the tower—before landing, so that a fieldful of revving bombers could hop off, become airborne, and make up in a skyful of rather loose formation—England-bound. And even after that mob had got under way, and he had landed, Tom Ball saw that there were plenty more bombers waiting for the next flight east.

Hardly had he taxied up to the receiving apron and climbed down before the ground-crew macs began to point into the cold, cloudy west.

"More bloody-well labor for the hangar slaves," one of them near Tom Ball growled. "Look at 'em . . . five . . . seven . . . nine. Ten, eleven, twelve. . . . An' there's No. 13, a bleedin' baker's dozen o' Bristol Beaufighters comin' in fer the service o' me own bent back. . . . Dom 'Itler an' his cold-weather war!"

MAJOR LITTLEJOHN, one of the RAF Operations officers, stopped to talk with Ball. He nodded westward toward where the baker's dozen of twin-engined ships were bobbing up and down, fighting gusty winds, and only scant yards above the ground, and said, "Flight of Beaufighters from Ottawa. . . . Lord, man, how they could use 'em in Blighty right now! And will they ever get there?"

Tom Ball studied the RAF man's face. "Why not?" he asked.

"Navigators. Shepherd pilots. Men who know the way east, Colonel Ball," the RAF major said. "We're hard hit for the men who can do it, y'know. Captain Higginbottom just took out that last group. Lord knows who'll take out the next. We have two top pilots on call. One's made two crossings, and has twenty two-engined hours to his credit. Other man's had one crossing, can hardly read a compass, but claims airline experience. I have m'doubts, Colonel."

"You are in a spot," Tom Ball agreed. "What the devil, man—you can't afford to send out all these jobs—and all these raw-john kids—behind lead men like those."

"Can't afford?" the RAF major asked. "What price can't afford, Colonel Ball, when the beast is at your door? Dammit, Colonel, chance, expense and death are among the only things we British can afford. They'll go east, sir, soon's the flight is ready, come hell or high water—good leader or bad, weather or no!"

"You're tough people, Major. Tough guys—you English. Damned if I don't think you have a right to live!" Tom Ball said.

Colonel Tom Ball said, "See you later, Major," to the departing busy Operations Office man, then he stood there in the bleak cold watching those blunt-snouted Beaufighters slide down for their landings. One by one, the group taxied in and killed off their engines on the Service apron. And because he had never had a good close look at the Beaufighter, Tom Ball began to walk down toward Service.

Yes, he agreed, that night-and-day fighter was a sweet job. Not too good to look at, but full of business. A ground-crew gabby guy told him that the Beau—this model Beau—was good for a 1500-mile range, and more with the extra tank they'd put aboard here at Botwood. Yes, sir, she was some fighter—this Beau. She had four 20-mm. cannon, in the floor of the fuselage, plus six machine-guns. And she could mount a power-driven turret amidships. All that, of course, once she got across. Now—just one pair of forward-shooting machine-guns.

"A swell fighting job—if they get there," Colonel Tom Ball said to himself, and then he strolled down the line, chin in collar and shoulders hunched against the cold blast of the bone-chilling Newfoundland morning.

YOOHOO! Yoohoo! Don't you try to hide your honest Yank mug from me, *Colonel* Ball," a fresh, brand-new Yank voice called to the passing Ball. "Yoohoo! Yoohoo you-all, you!"

Surprised, Tom Ball turned and studied the row of ships. There, hips-deep in an open pilot's hatch, stood a young fellow, and he was still talking and waving.

"Aw, so ya don't know poor people like me, eh?" the fresh owner of the fresh Yank voice demanded. "Wait till the next time I want to borrow some jack off you—I won't do it."

With the last dire threat, the bundled-up kid had stepped to the leading edge of his Beau's left wing, squatted for just a shake, then dropped catlike to the icy apron. Colonel Tom Ball had returned a haf-dozen paces, and now that his first surprise had passed, he could blow a cloud of icy breath and say, "Why, Tip, you loud-voiced young wahoo, what you doing here? . . . I'll be a nasty name if you're not a sight for tired eyes—or are you? And does your mother know you're out, out here in the wilds of Newfoundland?"

"She does," young Tip Ray answered, and grinned. "That is, after a manner. Maybe a limited manner. . . . But, m'gosh, imagine runnin' into you in this no man's land. You still ferryin' 'em for East-West, Tom?"

"That's right," Colonel Tom Ball answered. "But answer my first one. What are you doing aboard a Beaufighter?"

"I'm ferryin' too," the Ray kid made known, "so don't think you're the only winged wonder in the old family group. I'm on as a civvie pusher with CAB."

"CAB?" Colonel Tom Ball asked. "Oh, the Canadian Aircraft Board, eh? Say, you're getting right up there, what? Handling two-engined jobs, and pushing them all the way from Ottawa to Botwood, as I get it. You're all right, Tip."

"Ottawa-Botwood, nothing!" said the fly kid. "Mr. Colonel Ball, we flyin' gentlemen push these babies all the way across."

"No," Tom Ball said, incredulously, and in a very low voice. "Look, Tip, you shouldn't be doing that. You haven't had the hours. You think you're hot stuff, a big-ship man, but you're hardly dry behind the pin feathers. Then there's your mother, Tip. Hell, boy, if anything should happen to you . . . well, I don't need to tell you—she'd be sunk. A lady can take only so many hard blows, you know."

The Ray kid was serious for just a shake. When Tom Ball mentioned the lady taking only so many hard blows, the boy again recalled that he, too, had had a flying dad. That flying sire had been one of the first U. S. airmail pilots, a pal of another very first airmail flyer—the same Tom Ball. The first Tip Ray and Tom Ball had come out of that other World War, then gone into air mail when that service began to push itself westward past Chicago, to Omaha, to Cheyenne, to Salt Lake, to Reno, thence over the last tough hump and into San Francisco. And Tom Ball was sharing the Elko-Reno run with Tip Ray when the Ray gent met and married the Reno girl who was to become young Tip's mother. Tom Ball roomed and boarded with the Rays, in Elko. He was the guy who drove Mary Ray to the hospital when her time came, and Tip was at the Reno end of the hop. Tom Ball was also the guy who had to go to Mary Ray and break the very tough news when Tip Ray hit a butte in the Humboldt Sink. Young Tip was just a year old when Mary Ray became a widow. And, strange to say, she had never remarried. However, during the years that had skipped past, Tom Ball and the Rays had kept in touch. Fact is, when the boom in aircraft building hit the country, Tom Ball had persuaded Mary Ray to pack up, move south, and take a secretarial job with Lockheed. What's more, he had made the arrangements that made sure she'd get a good job in the Valley.

And then Mary Ray had written Tom Ball saying that young Tip was removing all the peace from her Valley home. The boy wanted to quit high school and learn to fly. She reminded Tom Ball that the offspring had just turned seventeen. So Tom Ball managed to make a brief hop out to the Coast. He talked it over with Mary Ray. And he told the mother that there was absolutely nothing she could do about that.

"I knew that from the first," Mary Ray agreed. "But I hoped, hoped against hope, that we might talk him out of it—maybe for a little longer. . . . Until we get into this war, when there'll be no choice. Tom, I know now, just as certain as I know that you and I are sitting here talking, that Tip will go the way of his father. . . . Now, now—don't say it. You don't need to soft-soap me, Tom. Tip's his father all over, and I'm glad! He'll fly and he'll die. You

all do. You're all the same. Oh, I know that a few of you live just a little longer than some others, but it's waiting for every man who dares. The few of you who are gathering a little gray hair, Tom, are gathering it on borrowed time."

"You are right, lady. I won't try to kid you," Tom Ball had agreed. "But it's a great game, a great business, and we can't live forever. . . . So let's see. How about sending Tip down to Ryan, in San Diego? They'll teach him right. It's all in the start, Mary. Start right, get the proper schooling, and you have a better chance to go on living. It's like swimming: teach yourself, and you'll never learn how."

"We want him right, Tom," was about all Mary Ray said, just then. "I hope he'll be good. I hope he'll be right up there!"

And now, as Tom Ball could see, the kid was right up there. He had to be to be ferrying wartime Beaufighters. But, standing there on that icy Newfoundland apron listening to a kid talk war, Colonel Tom Ball couldn't help wish that the kid were some place else. After all, a man might have no kids of his own, but a friend's kid, Tip and Mary Ray's kid, could be almost as close as blood itself. And Tom Ball suddenly found himself liking no part of this set-up. Again, a man might be excused for asking: Whose war is this, anyway?

"But I'm no yangyang, Tom," the Ray kid was saying, sort of talking his way into Tom Ball's troubled recollections. "This won't be my first crossing, you know. Been there and back three times."

"Three times?" Colonel Tom Ball repeated. "Good Lord. Where did you ever get any navigation, any cross-country know-how for this stuff?"

"Don't need it," the gay kid said. "All's we do is hook on, fly contact on that big brain out front, and first thing you know, there we are."

"Where?" Ball demanded. "Where are you if the weather closes down on you?"

"Oh, in that case," said young Tip Ray, "we make a try by compass. We dead-reckon it."

"That's how pilots get dead," Tom Ball reminded the boy. "Dead reck calls for plenty head, crust and guts, to say nothing of hours, hours and more hours in the old time-book."

"Tom ol' wheelhorse," Tip Ray said, "you're gettin' to be one third-class iky. Give a gent a break. Look us over, mister."

COLONEL TOM BALL was looking 'em over. His eyes were on the brave and willing young squirts unloading from the long line of nosed-in Beaufighters. It looked for all the world like an ahead-at-the-end-of-the-first-half squad coming off the gridiron; all hands well pleased by that rough, cold Ottawa-Botwood hop and ready for the second half—that Hell's Own Half, the transatlantic jump.

"All Yanks?" Tom Ball asked, nodding to the nearest group.

"Nearly all," Tip answered. "Oh, say. You know one of these gents. Remember Chic Moore? . . . He worked for you when you were chief for United Air. Remember? He burned a——"

"I remember," Colonel Tom Ball cut in; and he acted as though he wished he hadn't, or didn't, remember. Young Chic Moore had worked for United, out on the Coast. Ball was working the Western Division as chief pilot at the time. Young Moore had a wife and two kids living in a Valley bungalow near the airport. They were doing swell. An airlines pilot really drew down nice big jack. And being young and full of what it calls for, Chic Moore was just average airman. He liked to fly his stuff. Well, now and then, just to show how good he was, he'd jazz the home bungalow. He did it once too often. He burnt a plane, ten of his fifteen passengers, his co-pilot and stewardess—and his California bungalow, wife and two kids. Needless to say, Pilot Chic Moore had disappeared from the airlines scene.

"How is he?" Tom Ball asked, guardedly.

Tip Ray knew the whole story, and he said, "Nuts. But he's flyin' hell out of 'em, Tom. Anybody can get on with the CAB."

"Too bad," Tom Ball mused. "Chic was a good hand. Well, this should take his mind off that—if anything can get a man's mind off that. . . . Which ship is he in?"

Tip Ray stretched his neck and gazed far down the Service apron. "I think that's him standin' on that wing. See him—

lookin' off across the field? He does that all the time, no matter how bad the weather might be. He never mixes with the other pushers. They all think he's screwy, and I don't tell them anything."

"Don't," Tom Ball said. "I think I'll go down and see him. Where are you going now? What's the plan?"

"We report in to Operations now," Tip said. "Then we're free to hoss around, eat, and stand by for call. We'll shove off this afternoon. Never a dull moment here, you know. . . . Say, I'll see you again, won't I?"

"See me? Of course you'll see me. You'll see me all the way over. I'm squadron leader on this afternoon's hop."

"You're kiddin', Tom," Tip Ray said. "I'll bet you tell that to all the simple-minded boys you meet hangin' around air fields. . . . But kiddin' aside, how about you and me puttin' on the nosebag before you ferry south? I'll see you in pilots' mess."

COLONEL TOM BALL went down the line, casually, and met Chic Moore entirely by accident. He merely stopped below No. 1 engine of the last plane to gaze up and ask a mechanical question of the man standing so high against the bleak sky.

"How are these Hercules-IV power units, Pilot?" he asked.

The man who stood alone stopped gazing into the eastern sky, then started down vacuously, said, "Good. . . . Why, mister?"

"Oh, I'm just curious," Tom Ball answered. "I fly a bit myself. . . . Say, don't I know you?"

The man on the wing was gazing eastward again, and he said, "No." Then the empty stare left the far horizon and shifted down to the cold, hunched man on the apron, as though, perhaps, something had clicked in the man called screwy.

"The Chief," he said. "Chief Ball! Say, it seems a long time since I saw you. How are things out in——?"

"Now I get you—Chic Moore," Tom Ball enthused, and he put the old hot-welcome stuff into his voice. "Get down off that high hoss, Chic ol' cloud pusher. You and I are going to put on the feedbag and talk ship. Come on, step on it, feller. I'm freezing."

At first, Chic Moore seemed willing, even anxious for Tom Ball's company; and he shinned down from his cold perch and fell in at his old chief's left as that shivering Yank started for the warm canteen where breakfast snacks were still being served.

Chic Moore was wild-eyed and unkempt; but reaching the warmth of the canteen, he still remained tightly bundled in the great, dirty fur-lined flying suit which he wore. It struck Tom Ball that maybe Chic had lived in that dirty flying coverall for a long time. Seated in there, with the milling mob of wing-free, foot-loose pilots of several nations, Chic clammed up quickly. He even refused Ball's suggestion of hot food. Instead, he fished out some crushed, paper-wrapped sandwiches from the great bulging patch pockets of the dirty flying suit, explaining, "I don't need much chow to keep me moving, Chief. I live where I am. A guy has to be careful what he eats, and where he eats . . . poison, you know."

Tom Ball tried not to look at the man called screwy, for Tom Ball was afraid of what those wild eyes had already told him.

"Better have some hot java, Chic," he suggested.

Chic Moore had hot java—his own—and he reached deeply into one of the leg pockets of the flying suit and brought up a battered thermos bottle. "I make my own," he told Ball. "I don't need much. I fly alone, too. Even when I'm pushing a bomber across, I fly alone. No navigator. No radio guy. I could fly the Shepherds, if I wanted to. But they won't let me go alone. . . Chief"—and the wild voice grew louder—"I never take anybody off the ground with me! Never. No guy will ever die with me again, see? . . . Like that passenger list out there——"

"Forget it, Chic," Tom Ball said. "You didn't do that. Those things just happen. Forget it. You're on a big detail now. You've got the stuff to make good. You can wash things even again."

Chic Moore stared that blank, empty stare. "Sure, that's right," he mused, and his voice was down. "A man should be able to make everything even-Stephen again. Chances come, don't they? . . .

"Say, Chief"—and the seedy unkempt pilot was pushing back his chair—"I got to be getting back to that ship of mine. . . .

Man's got to watch his servicing—see that they put the fuel and oil aboard. . . . Sabotage, you know. Guys always trying to send a man down. Got to keep your eye on them. I've never lost a ferry, Chief. Been across and back fourteen times, and all the way across Germany to Turkey and India with one job. See you later, Chief."

WHEN Colonel Tom Ball walked into Operations he came upon Major Littlejohn, Colonel Logan and the base commander—Brigadier Hugh Hudson-Hyder—doing what might be called a three-way sweat. The top threesome in transatlantic aircraft delivery to Britain could not have appeared more dejected and utterly sunk had word been received that Adolf & Co. were ashore at Dover.

"Oh, come in and draw down a shroud, Colonel Ball," Major Littlejohn invited. Then to his co-workers he added, "We have no secrets from our American friend, gentlemen. Only within the hour I was telling the colonel how hard put we are for lead men. . . . Is there something we can do for you, Colonel Ball?"

"Yes, I think there is," Tom Ball answered. "As you men know, I'm rated as chief test pilot with East-West Aircraft; and East-West is now building exclusively for you folks."

"And a top-hole performance, Colonel Ball," the brigadier enthused.

"Thanks, sir," the Yank acknowledged in behalf of East-West Aircraft. "Being aboard with you folks one hundred percent, I've been thinking that a chief of test should know his product all the way. He should see it when and where it's actually in the work. It would help toward fuller, more-complete coordination; and coordination is the stuff that wins wars."

"You're one up on us, I'm afraid," Major Littlejohn cut in, "but carry on, Ball old man. *So what?* as you Yanks ask."

"I want you to assign me as squadron leader on the next group crossing," Ball said. "If it can be arranged."

Colonel Logan, top officer in Operations, said, "Colonel Ball, the next group out will hold seven Blenheims, thirteen Beaufighters, fifteen Vegas and seven Boston bombers. That's a lot of aircraft, sir. It would be nice to have them across. It would be gratifying to think that a man with thousands of air hours to his credit were in the lead. With the general's consent, I'll say you are in."

"It might not be regulations," Brigadier Hugh Hudson-Hyder admitted, "but it is good sense. And, hummmp, it's a mere courtesy to an officer and gentleman. The least we might do for a fellow airman. Glad to have you with us, Colonel Ball."

It was along toward sunset when the outgoing group was briefed. Tom Ball studied the fifty-odd men; and, with the exception of Chic Moore and a few old-timers in the RAF enlisted-man uniforms, they were just fresh, fly-young Tip Rays multiplied by so many more of his own hell-for-leather type. The Blenheims and Vegas, each carrying at least two men aboard, was the reason for so large a group, though the riding personnel was always held down to as small a minimum as possible. Well, the briefing was short and to the point. Colonel Ball was to be squadron leader. Forty-one other pilots would fly contact on that shepherd Blenheim; and all pilots would retain inter-ship communications with Colonel Ball. His orders were the orders of the flight, and all pilots would be held accountable for the to-the-letter compliance with those radiophone commands.

GOING out to the ships, Tip Ray came alongside Colonel Tom Ball just long enough to say, "So you wasn't blowin' bubbles, eh? You're going along for the ride. Swell, old-timer. But will I climb up your back and hop a free ride now and then! Yes, sir, we-uns 're gonna have fun, what I mean. . . . Oh, by the way, when you intercom those high-class orders, please address me as *Mr.* Ray."

"Mr. Baby Ray," Colonel Ball said, "I'll spank your butt pink, just like in the good old days, if you get in my thinning hair. . . . You heard the man—no fooling. And orders are orders."

"Shhh, Tom," Tip Ray then said, coming close and lowering his voice. "Maybe you'd better explain that to Chic Moore. He gets his own ideas, now and then. I've seen him take the lead away from the man on the point."

Tom Ball turned and looked back to

where sullen Chic Moore was bringing up the rear of the toward-ships parade. He said, "He'll follow me, Tip. I had quite a talk with him. The poor guy will be all right on this flight. . . . Anyway, I'll keep him in mind."

Colonel Tom Ball was aboard his own Blenheim when Chic Moore climbed to the wing and crouched alongside the open canopy.

"It's like old times, Chief. Gosh, I'm glad to think you're going to be along. Look, Chief. If you want to know anything about this course, just give me a buzz. I can put you right. . . . Watch out for some of these guys crowding you—if the sky soups up. I've seen men pressed down into the sea. Sabotage! Nazis. Watch your step, Chief."

Tom Ball, looking to his cockpit equipment, avoided those eyes. But he leaned a bit more to the left, whispering, "I'll watch 'em, Chic. You watch them too. I'm putting you in charge of those Beaufighter kids. Keep them in line. They're wild. And say, Chic. I'm putting the Vegas on the right of this Blenheim flight, and the Bostons on my left. That puts your Beaufighter group in the rear of the V. So hold them back there, Chic. Hold 'em rear and high, then if we should be surprised and jumped by any German outfit, you can fight your group as a high defense. Will you do that?"

"Okay, Chief. I'll hold the dizzy kids high and rear," Chic Moore promised, quickly getting back to the ground and starting for his ship. There was a new importance in the man. Colonel Ball watched him go, hoping that the once-keen inner man might be crowding his way back through the shock-produced haze of the past several tough years of isolation and self-accusation.

It was close to five o'clock, with a few hours of good, then fast-fading, sunlight remaining, by the time Tom Ball had all three groups behind his—and the broad Atlantic seven thousand feet below his blunt Blenheim nose. The late start would bring the tired pilots and lightly gunned ships into the off-England danger area while darkness was still on the islands. Of course, that little matter of flying contact through clouds and fog during the black hours wasn't too inviting, but it had to be done.

Now that he was on his way, with a forty-eight-year-old thinkbox to mull the layout, Tom Ball came face to face with the fact that a crew of long-lost ghosts were sort of ganging up on him to meet the future—the very close future. Old ghosts. Tip Ray, and now he had ol' Tip's wild kid somewhere back there above and behind his tail. Tip's kid. Mary Ray's one-and-only last hope. The kid shouldn't be there at all.

Then there was Chic Moore. A ghost beset by ghosts, a wild-eyed man who was seeing things. Not so good to have riding your tail, what with visions of sabotage in his troubled brain and a brace of loaded machine-guns under his hand. And the rest of the queer company of RAF and tram pilots, what of them? How many other Chic Moores were there in the group?

Those questions filled Tom Ball's brain. But the squeal of the Botwood beam crammed his earphones. And he realized that he must forget the first and pray that the monotonous sound would be with him all the way. So the first two hours and the last of the sunlight were finally put behind them. They were flying now on that great-circle curve of the world; and the co-pilot-navigator at Ball's right—a RAF Lieutenant Hill—checked and rechecked the line of travel. Ball felt that Hill knew his business. And the Yank took each change of course without hesitation or question.

NOW and then, going out over the interphone, he contacted each group leader for a progress report. They, to a man, reported all engines in good trim. So, when full darkness and seven o'clock was on the dials, Colonel Tom Ball thanked the good Lord for small favors and looked ahead into a sky that was getting just a bit more soupy. He had boosted the altitude to 10,000 during the last half hour. And if it was soupy at 10,000, then it was pretty certain to be close to zero-zero lower down. As for higher up: well, it takes fuel to climb, and altitude slows down progress. So he decided to push clouds just as long as the groups could hold themselves in formation—and keep him and his Blenheim lights in view. And he was lavish with lights. He was using all riding lights. The others limited themselves to a single tail-light.

When the point of no-turnback arrived, and passed, Tom Ball took that bit of recording from Navigator Hill pretty much as he'd take a dash of ice-cold shower water. It sort of hit him in the face. Halfway across! Mid-Atlantic, cold, bleak, stormy mid-Atlantic! Engines, do your stuff now or forever mark the spot!

Just to forget that, his intercom voice went out to ask all hands what's new, if anything. Everything seemed okay. And Tom Ball turned the air work over to Hill, turned and kneeled atop his seat cushion, then looked back and up through the murky sky to where all those red lights bobbed and glistened in the black, bobbed and glistened and, now and again, faded from view—as pushed clouds blotted them out—then snapped back into the picture again. It was still a tough war, Tom Ball decided; and they weren't out of the woods, or off that sea, yet. Not by one hell of a sight!

Along toward midnight, the man in command again began to remember that he was forty-eight. He was heavy-eyed, control-weary, and just a bit ill at ease because that Botwood beam squeal kept fading from his earphones. He could bring it back by giving way to the right. He, for the first time, began to argue a little with Hill. But the navigator insisted that their spaced corrections of direction should be the only give-aways, and, despite the fact that the high overcast hadn't given him a star shot since ten-thirty, the RAFman was fully confident of his plotted course.

"We can't always count on the beam, sir," Hill argued. "At this point in our passage, the Botwood beam might have a spread of a hundred miles here. It could be off a bit. But if we can just get a clearing overhead, so's I can get a shot at Polaris. Oh, we're all right, sir. We can navigate in from here, beam or no beam."

The RAFman had nice confidence, and he'd been through it several times before, so he should know. Ball began to slap his own head—by way of waking himself up—but the responsibility for forty-two good ships — plus the fifty-odd men — was a mighty load.

ALONG toward one o'clock, Captain Sibley, lead pilot of the Vega group, broke a long inter-squadron radio silence to say that one of his ships had fallen away—off the far outside of the right flight—with both engines dead. And even as he spoke, another voice came to the earphones: "Well, this is it, mates," that other man was saying. "Peel signing off. . . . Must a lost m'bloody fuel. Both sticks dead. Chin up!"

That was all, except that Sibley was again breaking the radio silence to tell his own pilots to take another look at their fuel gauges. "Not," he said, "that it'll do you chaps any good to learn the worst. But it might warn you to be stingy. Report."

LISTENING, Tom Ball was relieved to hear O.K. reports come to ear. "Good," Captain Sibley said. "Then dole it out slow."

Two o'clock came, then three, and Navigator Hill hadn't had a single sight of stars, so no shot at Polaris. And now he worked his pencil desperately. He checked and rechecked. Watching him, Tom Ball saw doubt, maybe fear, come to the navigator's face. But the Yank leader said nothing. Maybe, like Sibley's men and their fuel supply, it wouldn't do him any good to know now that Hill had blundered, and, in this case, there was nothing to be stingy about, nothing but all those ships and all those men . . . including the Ray kid. As for the Botwood beam—its squeal was long gone from his earphones. Well, things weren't too bad yet; and first daylight was less than two hours away. But two hours could pack a terrible lot of grief, especially if Hill had navigated them far north of the beam, clear off the great-circle curve, and into the icy toward-Iceland North Atlantic.

Of all the following pilots, strange to say, Chic Moore was the first to sense that all was not as it should be. It was along toward four a.m. when he heard: "Moore to squadron leader! Moore to squadron leader!"

"Ball speaking. What is it, Chic? Over."

"This course, Chief," Pilot Chic Moore blurted out. "It isn't right. I've been dead reckoning my own run all the way, and I say we went north of the circle between eleven o'clock and midnight. We're hell'n'-gone north!"

"Hold it, Chic," Ball said. Then he re-

ported that bit of bad argument to Navigator Hill. Hill seemed sunk.

"Sir," he said, "I'll take this man's course. Get it, sir. I'm wrong. I went wrong when and where he says I did."

Tom Ball went out to Chic Moore again. Chic gave him a position, telling him where they were, then giving the change correction that should put them where they belonged.

So Ball spoke to the entire flight, warning them that they were due for a big change; and when he made that change of direction, it was a full thirty degrees southeast.

When first daylight came to the sky, the four groups were flying in a fair sky sandwiched in between a solid bank of fog that gave no view of the Atlantic and a high blanket of solid cloud way up near 20,000 feet. So sunlight came dimly, just because there was a blacked-out sun somewhere off there in the east. And you couldn't determine even the approximate rising point of that sun, so there was no way yet to learn just how wrong Hill might have been or how right Chic Moore was.

EVEN a lost flight leader has a right to cheer up just a bit when he once more sees daylight flooding into his troubled world, and Colonel Tom Ball was no exception. He felt sorry for the RAF co-pilot-navigator. After all, the airman hasn't yet lived who hasn't logged just a few bad boners.

So, to cheer Hill up, and get the man's mind off the blunder, the Yank leader said, "She's all yours, Lieutenant Hill. . . . Fly her a bit. And get your tail up. . . . No, not the ship's—your own tail, young feller."

Tom Ball stood in the between-seats freeway, stretched, and once more gazed up and back at that skyful of ships. He counted the Bostons. They were all there. He counted the one-missing Vega group. Then his count went high-rear to where the Beaufighters spun their double props against the pink-gray of the cold early-morning sky.

Eleven. Eleven! But there had been what that mac on the Botwood apron called a "baker's dozen," thirteen. A chill forked its way through Ball's heart. Then he flopped back into his seat, snapped his headset back into place, then called for Chic Moore.

"Ball to Chic Moore! Come in, Chic!"

"Moore to Chief. What's wrong?"

"How many ships have you got—how many Beaufighters?"

"Eleven," Chic Moore's rather calm voice answered. "Two of the kids collided, and went down tied up in a ball. That was at about three-ten. One of the kids must've dozed off, Chief."

"For hell's sake, man, why didn't you report it?" Tom Ball demanded.

"Not while you had other troubles, Chief," Chic Moore answered. "When they go like that, they go. You can't do anything about it. . . . You've only lost three ships. That isn't too bad for a flight like this. . . . Say, Chief, we should be there. We should have land under us now."

That was something else to cause worry, worry above and beyond all the rest of his worries. Tom Ball's watch had long since told him that they should be there. But now his mind was on just one thing—two things—two Beaufighter kids going seaward tangled together in a double knot of falling wreckage. One of them might——

"Listen, Chic. . . . Are you still on, Chic?"

"Still here, Chief," the very calm voice answered.

"Who went down? Did you call for a check?" Ball asked.

"Check? Why? We'll know soon enough. When we set down. . . . If we set down. But as I say, Chief, we should be there," the man called screwy insisted. "I've dead-reckoned hell out of this run, and I know what I'm talking about. We crossed the lower coast of Ireland half an hour ago, and——"

"Chic. Chic," Tom Ball cut in. "Make that check. See if you can get the names of the missing men. I want to know."

"Sure, Chief," Chic Moore finally agreed.

Colonel Tom Ball, with his headset still in place, screwed around in his seat and once more gazed up and back to where the eleven Beaufighters were now flying a very tight formation in the brightening sky. He heard Chic Moore call for the check. He also watched Chic wigwag his own lead ship for the attention of his wild followers. One by one, Tom Ball then heard the names

come in: Silk, Finn, Haselhurst, Zalinski, Fagan, Scott. Then there was a thirty-second pause wherein no names came across. Chic Moore spoke to his men again. Those who had answered began to wigwag their ships and point ahead to Chic. Then the wild ones were all talking, yelling, in their crazy effort toward helping the check.

Rafferty reported. Then Ott, Jones and Wright. That made ten. Ten besides Chic Moore. So Chic told his gang to cut the talking. "Hell, men. You're in the battle zone," he said. . . . "Oh, hello, Chief. . . . Did you hear those names, or will I repeat?"

"I heard them," Ball said. "I didn't hear Tip Ray."

"Ray? Tip Ray? No such boy in the group, Chief," Chic Moore said. "Never was a Ray. Manning and O'Brien went down."

Tom Ball felt sort of dizzy. Perhaps he was the man who should be called screwy. No such a man as Tip Ray in the group?

He was just about to start yelling on his own hook, in spite of the fact that they should have been on radio silence, when a third voice came onto that inter-ship air. "Oh, Tom," the voice said, "this is Tip. I'm Finn to these guys. You know how it is, I signed up that way, just in case. . . . Well, you know."

TOM BALL knew, felt relieved, then turned to his other worries.

Co-pilot Hill, without speaking, put a finger ahead to a fuel dial. It was close to the empty mark; and the Yank leader knew only too well that every tank in the four groups was too close to that danger point. So he said, "I'll take 'er, Hill old man."

They were at 11,000 elevation. Ball studied the sky overhead. There were a few thin places now, shimmering areas where the sun threatened to break through. Hill was watching those thin areas closely.

"If I could just get a clear shot at that sun," he said, and it was very close to a prayer.

"Wonder if we can spare the fuel to go above it for the shot?" the leader said. "Wonder if we could break through? . . . Ah, by hell, Hill—there's your sun!"

Grabbing up his sextant, Hill made his sun shot; then went to work over his chart board, doing a brand-new sweat against time and the dwindling fuel supply.

Colonel Tom Ball said, "I'll see how low we can take these ships," and then he quit that 11,000 level, eased off on his power, dropped the bow and began an eastward glide toward the sea-hiding blanket of fog. 10,000 came to his altimeter, and he was still well above the fogbank. Back over his tail, he could see the other groups letting down. Nine thousand came, then eight. He was just beginning to sieve mist through his props when 7,500 was on the dial.

Hill said, "I'm afraid your man Moore is right again, sir. We must've crossed the lower coast of Ireland . . . for we're directly over Greater London now."

"Ye gods, man! You mean we're due to head out over the North Sea—toward Germany?" Ball exploded.

"We are, sir. And this time—thank God!—I'm not wrong," Hill stated. "Over London, sir."

Ball studied the altimeter—the fuel gauges—the altimeter again—then his watch. That altimeter reading—7,500 feet! That's what it would be if they were over Botwood, under the identical barometric conditions that prevailed at take-off. But here, over London, more than 2,300 miles removed, that altimeter reading could be far wrong. It was bound to be wrong. The flights were either more than 7,500 in the air, or less than that. If higher, okay. But if lower, not so good! If they let down, where would they start pulling up—in the event there was no under-fog clearing?

Colonel Tom Ball said, "Hill, old man, we're going to find the bottom, you and I. We've got to let down."

"Go to it, sir," Hill said. "I'm at the bottom, sir. The very bottom. I've naught to lose."

Ball spoke all ships. "Leader to all pilots," he said. "We're over London—east of London now. Check your altimeters with me. 7,500 feet! 7,500 feet! Make certain on the check—7,500! I'm going to let down alone. You men carry on as you are. I'll read my altimeter for you as long as I can. If I stop reading, note my last figure well. It will be your "0," the ground. . . . Captain Sibley, you'll take over the lead. Acknowledge, Captain Sibley."

"Sibley to squadron leader! Will comply with order," the acknowledgment came.

SOMETHING flashed down across the bow of Ball's ship; and he glanced up and ahead to where that something flashed in the now-bright sunlight. It was a Beaufighter. A hundred yards out front, that Beaufighter reached Ball's level, then began to flatten out its dive. When it was flying at an even keel, Chic Moore's voice came into Ball's earmuffs.

"I'll take care of the let-down, Chief. Moore speaking. I know my way. I know this London area. I'll show you to a drome. . . . 7,500 feet . . . 7,300." Then the fog-bank took Chic Moore's Beau from view. "7,000 . . . 6,500 . . . 6,000 even . . . 5,500 . . . 5,000. . . . No sunlight here . . . 4,500 . . . 4,000 . . . 3,500 and still green soup . . . 3,000 . . . 2,500 and no break . . . 2,000 even . . . 1,500. . . . One grand, Chief . . . 900. 800. 700. Still black as a hat. 600. 500. I'm going to start feeling for that old ground now—400. . . . Hey, daylight! And oh, by hell! I'm just twenty feet off the sea. . . . Ye gods! I missed a battlewagon by inches! . . . Come on down, Chief! Start looking for your sea at 400 feet. We're east of Margate. I can see the headland."

"Correct altimeters for 7,100 feet!" Ball ordered. "7,100. Now give way and loosen up those formations . . . spread wide, and start down. I'll see you under the blanket. And good luck."

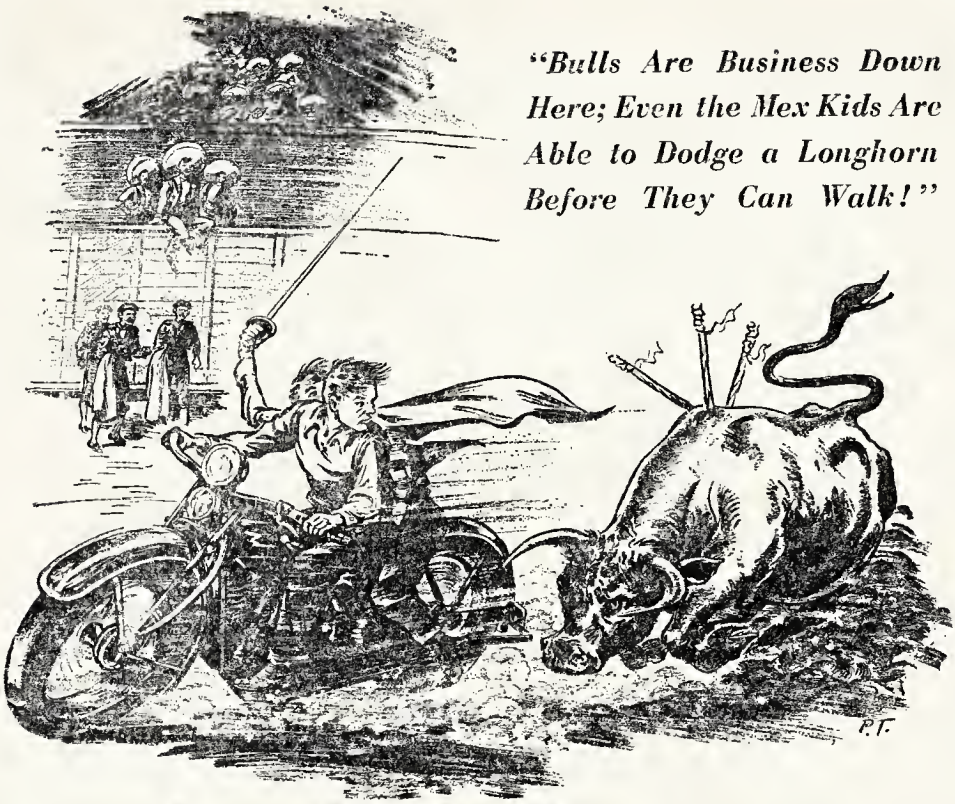
Ten minutes later, a mighty loose formation of four types of aircraft turned northwestward across the Thames estuary and cut back toward solid ground and waiting airdromes. Hill made a count, and reported all ships present. And the weariness left Colonel Tom Ball, for he was hopped up again; and as for his forty-eight years of old age—there was no such thing! He had flown where young guys fly, and he was there at the finish. Away out front, showing the way in, Chic Moore led all others by a good mile. But hadn't young Tip Ray warned Tom Ball that the guy called screwy was in the habit of taking over the lead from the official leader? Somehow or other, Tom Ball didn't mind at all.

TO THE city man the fact was becoming more apparent—this was a good old-fashioned down to grass roots crime. Yet, he had a hunch, too, that money was the master key, that he was up against a familiar protagonist—good old murder for profit!

DEATH ON A PARTY LINE

a great new serial starts in our next issue . . . . by

Merle Constiner



"Bulls Are Business Down Here; Even the Mex Kids Are Able to Dodge a Longhorn Before They Can Walk!"

THE MAD MATADOR

A Short Story

By WILLIAM LYNCH

Author of "The Third Survivor," etc.

JUST how former dispatch-rider Bill Ormiston came to be in Mexico City in the midsummer of '45—past *novillero* time—is a thing known only to Bill Ormiston and God. His overland trek from Montreal to points south, following the peace, is a sordid documentation of deception, chicanery and concealment, plus a downright Australian genius for ready improvisation in the face of anything.

Yet here he was in Mexico City with former dispatch-rider Johnny Rayment of Chattanooga, Tennessee, a willing reinforcement gathered en route; and Jesús Madano, able guide and hopeful entrepeneur at a flat salary of five *pesos* a week; and two motorcycles and a charcoal burner full of *tortillos* between the three of them. The peon's sallow face was black with gloom and in his eyes there was reflected the dull glint of a magnificent despair.

"It was beautiful, *senors,*" he sighed, "your riding of the machines. Never has there been such fastness, so great danger. Yet there is nobody to see it. I tell you, *amigos,* over at the *Plaza* there is the color and the bright costumes and the drums rolling and the spectacle of the *banderillas.* The riding of the machines is for France, yes, for England, yes, for anywhere, yes—for Mexico City, no!"

"Here are twenty *pesos,*" Bill said. "We won't be needing you any more. Maybe I should have listened to you before. You speak sense, Jesús."

"I thought maybe it cain't be so easy as you figured," Rayment said. "It's just like the peon says. These babies've been playin' bull since way back. It's part of the setup round here, like tortillas, an' frijoles an' tequilla. Even the Mex kids are able to dodge a longhorn 'most before they can walk."

The peon nodded appreciatively and started prodding a mass of thick dough.

"How much dough've you got left, Yank?" Bill wanted to know.

"Enough to get me right back home to Chattanooga. But what about you? Chattanooga, Tennessee ain't Sydney, Australia."

"They are saying in Vera Cruz," the peon said, "that there is work for everybody. Also in Belmonte."

"I didn't come down here to work," Bill argued. "My idea was to see how the other half subsisted before goin' back home. Then I gets myself this speedway promotin' plan, but the cash customers in these parts just don't like it. Yet anything up to ten thousand *aficianados* will walk leagues to see a boy in silk pants dance a gavotte on the lawn with a circus bull. If that's a Mex's idea of a rollickin' Sunday afternoon then I'll go right back to croquet. C'mon, let's get into town for some coffee. Or maybe they only serve beef extract around here! Ugh!"

THE conversation in the Café Plaza dissolved on the downbeat as General Gonzales Carlos Luis Arrado and his assorted collection of *aficianados,* matadors, picadors and gypsy-like peons pushed their way through the room towards Ormiston's table.

An aged *criollo* detached himself from the party and edged forward nervously. "The General wishes to lodge a complaint, *Senors,*" he began. "The General says that the motorcycle noises are maddening the bulls at the *Plaza.* Only last night, *Senors,* a matador was gored."

"He forgot to duck. So what! Can't the bull get in an occasional gore, too, or is the whole thing a man-made racket?"

The *criollo* raised mildly protesting hands. "The point is," he said, "the national sport is involved. Next week there is the *fiesta* and the General is anxious for the safety of his matadors."

"You can tell the General," Bill said, "that he can sleep tight. Tomorrow we leave Mexico City."

"Qué bueno, senor!" The *criollo* appeared relieved as he turned to the General and translated: Unsmilingly the party about-faced and left the Café Plaza. Bill Ormiston watched them go with eager eyes.

"Who's *that?"* he demanded of the peon.

"The General is what you might call the big *pistolero*—the big shot. He owns nine *ganaderias*—where the bulls are raised—as well as many of the *plazas.* But always he is unhappy. He is everything and yet he is not liked by the people. It is a thing to be not liked. It is a bad thing to be everything and still to be not liked. There is talk everywhere of the General's fondness for women, *amigos,* that and the political frustration. I am sorry for the General. Yet how nice it must be to have many *pesos* in the pocket."

Ormiston asked him about the *fiesta,* then.

"Next Sunday. There will be much celebration and the colored lights. And after the bullfight there will be the dancing in the square, that, and the presentation of the matadors. It is said that El Soldado himself —*el torero aristocrata*—is coming from Vera Cruz. When you have seen the *fiesta, senors,* then you will understand that sad thing of the motorcycles."

"Already we understand that sad thing of the grids, don't we Johnny? Ormiston started balling the table crumbs. "You know, Johnny, I'm beginning to get a little idea—"

Rayment raised his head and set down his cup without spilling a drop.

"I cain't say I ain't interested, Bud," Rayment said. "Come on, then, 'fore it splits you wide open."

Bill caught the peon by the sleeve. "You go right out there and get the General back here. Tell him it's about the *fiesta."* The peon nodded and left and Bill turned to Rayment. "What do you think of the motorcycle matadors for a headline, Yank?"

"You mean fightin' *el toro* on a grid?"

"Why not? Spectacular, don't you think?

And, besides, it might get us home. If you don't like it say so an' I'll pull it myself."

"I ain't sayin' I do or I don't. But it's a mighty revolootionary idea and maybe the old boy won't like it."

But the old boy did and through his *criollo* he made it clear that nothing must interfere with the national gravity of the annual *fiesta,* so if the *senors* would agree to their performance being billed as a comic novelty for the purpose of entertaining the *aficianados*—

"Agree? Agree to anything," Bill said. "What's the fee?"

"A thousand *pesos* each."

"What's that in currency, Yank?"

Johnny Rayment made a calculation on his fingers.

" 'Bout three hundred United States dollars—'bout sixty Australian pounds."

Bill grimaced. "So it looks like a nitrate carrier out of Buenos Aires. Well, it's goin' *home,* anyway." He turned again to the *criollo.* "Tell the General we accept."

A SLOW smile spread across the face of Jesús as the implications of the plan slowly penetrated the gloom that for days had developed like a putrescent sludge upon his stream of consciences.

"Perhaps," he said, "there will be an allowance for the confidential peon. Always at the bull ring there is the matador's confidential peon and always there is the allowance."

In the late afternoon they visited the General's out-of-town *ganaderia* for the purpose of selecting a suitably innocuous bull. A peon indicated the chosen beast with all the gusto of Solorzano meeting for the first time a Spanish bull specially imported for the unconquerables.

"Shucks!" laughed Rayment. "That crittur sure looks like he's got three feet in the knacker pits. Can it walk?"

"General Arrado has no desire to see the comedy act end on a note of sadness, *senors.* Hence the animal you see before you."

The bull must have seen better times. Any change from his present condition couldn't have been a change for the worse, and now, in the autumn of his declining years it was plain that he'd vouchsafed, like Ferdinand, merely to cast anchor under a friendly Sycamore, and devote his remaining days to peace, prayer and bovine meditation.

"There's somethin' cock-eyed here," Bill complained. "Why would the General be wantin' to do such a kind act toward us. Why this toro's so ancient and inane that he wouldn't get peeved if he was let loose in the Red Square, Moscow. But if *that's* all we got to fight for two grand then the money's blood money."

General Arrado began to say something quickly to the *criollo.*

"The General wishes it to be plainly understood," the *criollo* relayed, "that it will be necessary for you to destroy the bull before payment is made."

"How would the General like the toro destroyed?" Bill asked. "Do we have to make him stand up or can he still do that himself?"

General Arrado laughed loudly at this and he didn't stop laughing all the way back to the *hacienda* at the top of the hill.

"This turn of ours is Buster Keaton stuff, see," Johnny Rayment explained, "an' we're the fall guys for a big belly laugh among the *aficianados.* Why that old bull couldn't horn a hole in a soap bubble. Maybe you got somethin', Bill. Seems like what bullfightin' has needed right down through the centuries is a really good laugh to balance the programme."

JESUS was troubled again at dinner. "It is so unlike the nature of General Arrada," he sorrowed. "The General is not a nice man to live with."

"He's a smart business man," Bill said. "Why, this act should stack 'em right along the aisles. That monkey knows his work."

"*El toro* he is too quiet, *Senor.* It is not good for the *fiesta* when the bull is so quiet. Never have I been so afraid."

"What have you got to be afraid of? You're the matador's confidential peon, ain't you? They die for that kind of stuff in this end of the world, don't they?"

"The General gave it out," the peon said, "that he wishes to dispense with the formality of the *bandilleras,* if you will agree, *senors.*"

"For my part," Rayment said, "you can tell the old codger we'll dispense with the formality of the bull, too, if he likes. By

the way, Bill, how're we goin' to team up in this?"

"That I have already arranged," Jesús said. "The Senor Ormiston will drive the machine and the Senor Rayment will ride pillion and he will carry the cape and the sword."

"That kind of stacks up the odds against the matadors, don't it, Bud? Why cain't we have a bike apiece?"

"Never are there two matadors," the peon said, gravely. "One bull, one motorcycle. It is the General's order and must be obeyed."

General Arrado, in full *fiesta* battle-dress greeted them with an impressive display of dumb charm. The General's *criollo* escorted them to the official stand for the ceremonious introduction to the civic fathers.

"The General is happy to be met here with you at the *fiesta,"* the *criollo* said. "He trusts you will find *el toro* to your liking."

"Tell the General," Bill cut in, "that he couldn't've found a better animal between here and the Black Butte and if he'll pay over the dough now we'll get started."

"When *el toro* is destroyed, *Senor,* the money will be paid. That is the General's order."

"Whatever happens, *senors,"* Jesús said, "remember that your confidential peon is also in the ring, I and the picadors and the doctors and all the ring staff. There is nothing to fear, *amigos.* You must first study *el toro* and see which horn he favors. That is important. Already I have shown Senor Rayment where to put the sword in *el toro.* That also is important. And Senor Ormiston, it grieves me to mention the matter of my peon's allowance—"

"Later, mate. Hear 'em yell! C'mon, Johnny, hop aboard and for pete's sake keep that cape clear of the engine."

THE *aficianados* roared into the sunlit afternoon sky as the machine leapt through the gates with a sullen growl and a flourish of dust. *El toro,* on the opposite side of the ring, was half-hidden behind the dusty camouflage of his own making. The ring attendants stood around the inside rim of the rail, cerise and yellow capes flamboyantly to the fore, whilst at regular intervals waited the mounted guard of picadors. They throttled down and watched the steel gates click shut behind them.

"How do you feel, Bud?"

"I'm fine, Bill said. "Wonder how *el toro* feels about it. By the way, why aren't the customers laughin'?"

The bull moved shyly forward from his cloud of dust and propped the moment he espied the new spluttering, coughing wheeled adversary that was idling back and forth in front of him.

"Tell you why they ain't laughin," Rayment said sharply. "Because this ain't the same bull!"

"Holy sufferin' snakes!"

"Yes, sir, it's a ring-in. This monkey's as wicked as they come. See, he ain't pawin' the earth any more. Just lookin' us over. That's the sign of a bad bull."

"I got it. This is Arrado's way of holdin' us to public shame an' ridicule. What a rat!"

Jesús came running across from the fence. "There's a mistake, *senors,"* he said. "It's the Spanish bull, *El Diabolo.* You must get out of the ring, *amigos.* You must, must, must. This is very bad."

"It's also very bad for the General," Bill said. "Not to mention the *toro.* I need those *pesos* worse than ever right now. What do you say, Johnny?"

"Speakin' for me personally I'm all in favor of givin' the old boy a run for his *pesos.* Anyway, seems like the bull is makin' up our minds for us right now. Throttle up, son."

With a convulsive roar that rocked the air the machine lunged forward on a curving course. The nose of the bull, lowered in doubt and uncertainty, took a glancing smack from the flying rear wheel of the motorcycle.

"First blood to the matadors!" said Bill, easing round to face the bull.

The crowd began to yell and a big section of the official quarter, led by General Arrado, was already folding himself in the middle with belly laughs.

"El torero aristocrata!" roared the General and in a moment the General's bleat of joy swept right through the *aficianados* in the stand until the chorus was pretty general.

"So the old boy's gettin' his big laugh," Bill said, his eyes never wavering from the

weaving snout of the bull. The animal skipped away a few steps, the better to contemplate the low, mechanical matador that delivered such violent blows to the aristocratic snout, and then began a prancing, mincing movement compounded of fear and bovine frustration.

"The drill here," Bill muttered, "is to keep him movin'. I think maybe we've got more resources of gas than he has. Hold your hat, mate."

THE machine lunged forward again and swung away when a few feet distant from the half-lowered nose of the bull. Again the rear wheel brought up heavily and caught the animal a rude, nose-searing smack that sent it sideways in shock and an awakening anger. It began a slow retreat to the fence and propped itself there until a horseman spurred his mount and pricked the bull in the hind quarters. With a roar of disapproval, *El Diabolo* spun fiercely on the picador and finding only a prodding spear there, smartly wheeled and charged the motorcycle in a cloud of dust.

"Open her up, Bud."

Bill Ormiston dragged the motorcycle around with his swinging foot and opened the throttle wide. His left leg still swinging free, he slewed the machine into a tight maneuver, the bull overshooting at each angle of the complicated geometrical design that marked the soft earth. Four times they circled the ring with *El Diablo* never more than a few feet rearwards and occasionally brushing the swaying figure of the rear matador. Then the bull stopped again, a swaying, blowing, heaving figure of defiance.

"Twice I nicked him," Johnny said, in the moment of respite, "but I'm still trying to figure how to sink this knife between his ears with him behind me. But keep at him, Bud. Run him off his feet."

This time *El Diablo* sidestepped the spinning rear wheel with a show of dexterity that brought a mild handclap from the galleries and then savagely it followed through with its head on a level with Johnny's pillion. Ormiston threw the machine into a violent right-hand skid and momentarily Johnny's hands came down in a quick seizure of insecurity and began clawing for a grip on the pillion frame. In that moment the cerise and yellow cape trailed down dangerously towards the ground.

"Johnny, for the love of mike! The cape! Look!"

Like meat feeding into a mincing machine the colored cape fastened itself into the mechanism and tore and writhed and twisted itself into a tight little noose of destruction. The obstructed motor gave out a few agonized coughs, skidded a few yards and somersaulted twice before bringing up violently against the rail. Bill Ormiston sailed gracefully through a calico sign advertising Corona cigars and ended up among the *aficianados*. Temporarily unbalanced, *El Diablo* began a nervous jog-trot backwards and forwards, his tail twitching with suspicion, his bellows heaving with the exertion of his assault. Seeing nothing there, but a gaping hole in the boarding, he wheeled and saw Johnny, who was backing away, the sword protectively outthrust, and picadors and attendants cavorting all around.

Seeing the mangled machine against the fence, the bull approached it tentatively and then commenced a prolonged and violent attack upon the heap of wreckage. In its bovine eagerness to dispatch once and for all this metallic enemy of the species, *El Diablo* lunged lustily in for the kill only to emerge from the fray with a highly complicated system of wheels, chains and cylinders firmly enmeshed on its long horns.

Those of the *aficianados* who hadn't already collapsed with sheer convulsions began now to sway in a paroxysm of uncontrolled mass hysteria at the magnificent spectacle of Johnny Rayment seeking a foothold on the wreckage affixed to *el toro's* head, his sword-arm dutifully upraised for the final and fatal vertebra lunge.

With two thousand *pesos* hanging on the surety of his foothold, and with *el toro's* assault weapons effectively disorganized, Johnny's commercial instincts now took complete control as he clambered aboard the bull's landing stage and straddled his neck. Three times the sword came down and on the third jab he found the right spot. Then triumphantly he looked around for Bill, but instead there was only the peon, Jesús, trying to make himself heard above the noise from the galleries.

"Quickly, *Senor,* come quickly."

Johnny jumped clear as *el toro* slithered forward to the ground.

"What's wrong? Where's Bill?"

"At the Café Plaza, *Senor*. But please to hurry. There was a little matter between Senor Ormiston and General Arrado. I saw it happen but a few minutes ago. But you must get out of town."

"Did Ormiston get the money?"

Acute melancholia stole across the peon's face.

"Nothing. But General Arrado he got everything. It is a very bad thing, *Senor*, the way Senor Ormiston beat up the General. It was very bad and at the same time very magnificent, *Senor*."

"You mean all that was—for nothing?"

The peon smiled. "In Mexico City, Senor, it is not nothing when General Arrado is with two black eyes and a raw nose. What you did out there, *Senor*, was for the *pesos*. What Senor Ormiston did up there in the official stand was—how do you say?—the pay-off. Thus it is said, Senor Rayment, that by their deeds ye shall know them. *Adios, Senor*."

MURDER puts through a call to the Garden Spot of the Universe . . . . . .

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ALL IN ALL, A WHALE OF AN ISSUE!

I

IF Mike Goodenough had suspected Miss Susan Kidwell was plugging calls on the Taxi Association switchboard tonight, he probably would not have answered the call bell at the Main and Sycamore box.

It was 9:40 when Mike stepped from his dripping cab to the call box on the alley corner.

The street lights on Main, half a block away, had a pallid glow through clammy fog and misty drizzle. The box bell was ringing impatiently.

"Relax, Beautiful," Mike said airily into the mouthpiece. "Goodenough is here—always good and usually enough—and were we thinking about a date?"

"Were we?" a tart and familiar voice replied.

"Ouch!" said Mike. He was tall and loose-jointed as he leaned against the damp brick wall and grinned in the fine drizzle pelting his face. "My wires got crossed, Suzie. I thought you were Jenny Sadler."

"Obviously," Miss Kidwell said bitingly. "This, I suppose, is taking your mother to the church bazaar, which was the reason you wouldn't take me to the lodge dance when I asked you."

"Benny Friedbaum got sick. I had to work my number 3 job tonight. Business before mother."

"Hooey," Miss Kidwell replied, with the rudeness of one who had attended the same grammar school and had no illusions.

"You had two fireballs waiting to take

The Taxi Driver's Fare Used Snakes, a Monkey and a Parrot Who Called for Suckers!

you to the dance. Or was it four?" Mike reminded.

"It was six," said Miss Kidwell coldly. "I'd be dancing now if Jenny's boy-friend hadn't turned up on a short furlough. Jenny was wild at having him loose after dark while she worked. I swapped shifts with her."

"Well, turn me loose. The meter in the cab is getting cold. What's on your call sheet?"

"Two hot ones. That big-shot lawyer uncle of yours is trying to find you. He says drive by his apartment."

"No dice. We had it out last week. He wants me to come in the firm."

"You're a lawyer, aren't you?" Miss Kidwell reminded coldly. "And you wheeling broken-down hacks, with your hand out for tips."

"Keeps me out in the open. I've learned to like it," Mike said amiably.

"Keeps you in trouble, and that you always liked," said Miss Kidwell disagree-

ably. "This other call is tailored for you. It's a hurry-up. The woman sounded like she was scared to death. 542 Malcome Street. Upstairs. Madame Stephanie. You spell it with O's. *Modome.*"

"Modome Stephanie what?"

"That's all. Just Modome Stephanie." Miss Kidwell cleared her throat. "The streets are bad tonight. Be a taxi mug if you insist, Mike, but stop being dumb enough to dream you're still driving a Redball Express across France."

Mike sighed and gave his driver's cap a more jaunty tilt on bleached-out hair. "Wish I was."

"You're truck nutty," said Miss Kidwell disagreeably. "Knowing half the cops on the force won't help you one of these bad nights, Mike Goodenough, when you try a General Patton Redball around a dark corner. The Police Commissioner and all his flatfoots won't be able to scrape you together again."

"Worried, Gorgeous?"

"Your mother and your uncle are," said Miss Kidwell coldly. The line went dead.

MALCOME STREET was only a few minutes drive from the Sycamore callbox, the way Mike wheeled any of the three aged taxicabs he had recently purchased. He swooped to the curb at 542, blew the horn twice, and stepped out on the sidewalk.

He was expertly rolling a cigarette from sack tobacco when a window on the second floor went up with a bang. There was no light behind the window. A woman called through the dripping fog with fretful urgency.

"Took you long enough to get here, driver! I got to have you come up and help me down!"

"Coming."

It was a three-floor walk-up. A doctor occupied the lower floor. Mike ran lightly up to the second. His mouth was wide and friendly; he was smiling as he knocked at the front apartment. A screech of anguish sounded inside, and then an unmistakable parrot squawled, *"Come in, suckers!"*

Mike was smiling broadly as the door was jerked open. His eyes, which were blue, with an innocent and pleasurable way of contemplating the world, widened a trifle at sight of the big lady in the doorway.

She was larger than he was. Not exactly a fat lady, either. She had a big-boned, domineering presence, heightened by a full band of dark down on her upper lip. But her bright red mouth was small and petulant. Carrot-colored hair, obviously dyed, lay stiffly waved under a masterpiece of felt and artificial fruit, which tilted coyly and precariously toward her left temple.

"Here. Take Sir John," she said nervously. "Don't pay no attention to him."

Mike put a finger through the top ring of a large bird cage covered with scarlet-flowered green silk. *"Hello, sucker!"* the parrot squawked under the silk.

"Hello," Mike chuckled, lifting the cage and pushing up the silk with a forefinger.

The parrot's hooked bill gnashed against the cage wire and nicked the end of his finger. The large woman had dodged back into the dark room inside the doorway. She heaved a heavy suitcase out to Mike's feet. "You better carry this one down too."

Mike grunted with the weight, started to comment, and then let it pass. Some queer fares turned up in the taxi business.

Something chattered shrilly in the dark room. Madame Stephanie loomed in the doorway with a small monkey perched on one shoulder, a large leather bag in one hand and a small overnight case in the other. She hooked the door shut with a high heel and marched to the stairway.

The small monkey balanced on her shoulder and looked back at Mike. A grin at the animal drew a simian scowl of threat. Halfway down the stairs the small overnight case flew open.

Something that looked like white silky veiling tumbled in a billowing froth around Madame Stephanie's feet. Her exclamation was irritable as she stopped and crammed the material back.

In the taxi she ordered nervously, "1438 Grafton Avenue. And hurry, young man."

The small monkey jumped from her shoulder to the back of the seat and chattered as Mike closed the door. "Lady," Mike promised, "you're practically there."

Three minutes later his passenger protested shrilly, "You almost hit that car! Don't go so fast! I'm nervous enough as it is!"

"*Come in, sucker!*" the parrot squawled in the cage beside her.

Miss Susan Kidwell would have enjoyed it. Mike looked in the rear-view mirror and drove still slower.

"Hurry! Not this slow, driver!"

Mike kept an eye on the mirror. "Headlights tailing us around every corner I turn, lady," he said over his shoulder. "This is the Third Precinct. There's a squad-car cop in this district who's promised me a ticket that'll stick."

Madame Stephanie snapped, "I don't believe it!"

In the mirror Mike watched her turn on the seat and look out the back window. Half a block back headlights were glowing dimly through the greasy mist and drizzle. The wipers were snapping across the windshield. A sedan came out of a misty side street like a rocketing ghost.

Mike footed the brakes fast. He felt tires slide a bit on the slick asphalt, and he rolled on and missed a rear bumper by inches. He grinned. Suzie Kidwell would have loved that miss.

HIS passenger had apparently not noticed the near collision. "I've changed my mind," she said hurriedly. "Take me to 706 Elgin—and hurry."

"Elgin's in the Third Precinct too," Mike informed her. "And we still have headlights back there."

"I—I'll pay your fine."

"No dice," Mike refused amiaby. "This cop I told you about would like to see me lose my license. I bought some cabs out from under his brother-in-law's nose. The whole family's sore about it."

"A fine driver you are! What do I care about who's sore at you? I called a taxi and I want service."

She was looking out the back window again, shaky, getting frantic. Suzie Kidwell had a genius for shunting unusual fares to the Goodenough Cabs. Mike whistled a few bars of Yankee Doodle and rested a speculative eye on the rear-view mirror as he drove faster.

The headlights stayed with him, but drew no closer. Sergeant Shute would hardly be so patient. Shute was a hot-tempered man with an unforgiving eye for speeders.

Mike made a fast and velvet-easy stop at the Elgin Street address. His passenger paid him and neglected a tip. The headlights had vanished while Mike was getting out. A sedan came around the corner, but it was not the car which had been following them.

"Here. You got to help me to the door with all this."

Mike took the parrot cage. Two young couples were coming on the sidewalk. One of the girls exclaimed, "Look at the monkey!"

"*Suckers!*" the parrot squawked.

Mike carried the heavy suitcase and the bird cage to the front door, where Madame Stephanie was fumbling in a handbag for a key. The house was a three-story brownstone, dark, curtains drawn.

"That's all, young man. I ain't gonna tip you. I never do."

"Thanks anyway, lady," Mike said amiably. A last cry from the parrot followed him. "*Sucker—*"

At five minutes to eleven Mike sat in Big Andy's diner at Grand and Dock Road, dunking a sugared doughnut in coffee. Big Andy slowly polished glasses and gossiped.

"I hear old Tom Fogarty had to slip your uncle a five grand lawyer's fee for winning that damage suit against him," Big Andy remarked, holding a glass up against the light. "Fogarty like to had a stroke when he got the bill."

"Uncle Cyrus comes high," Mike remarked.

Big Andy recalled, "I busted your uncle's nose one day when we was peddling papers outside the old South Street ball park. If you was to ask me then was Shiny Goodenough gonna be a big-shot lawyer, frankly, I'd have give you *no*."

Patrolman Clancy walked in for his eleven o'clock cup of coffee. "Damp nights like this a man oughta be home," Clancy grumbled. "How's hacking tonight?"

"Good. Any excitement, Clancy?"

Clancy drank his coffee standing up, and shook his head. "I ain't even had a prowl. But over in the Third they found a monkey sittin' on top of a dead woman—"

MIKE choked on his coffee. Clancy insisted, "I ain't kiddin'. She was on the sidewalk, around the corner from Elgin. The monk was on her head. The little devil bit Sergeant Shute's finger."

"He should have clipped Shute's big nose," Mike suggested cordially. He tossed a dime on the counter.

"A monkey bit my cousin's kid at the zoo last year," Big Andy said as he punched the register. "You goin', Mike?"

"Hot coffee doesn't register on my taxi meter," Mike said.

A few moments later he was calling in to the Association switchboard. Susan Kidwell was still on duty. Susan's voice sounded worried.

"Where are you, Mike?"

"Dock Road and Liberty."

"I don't like what's been happening around here," said Susan. "Sergeant Shute paid me a visit."

"With flowers?"

"Don't try to be funny, Mike. Sergeant Shute wanted to inspect the call sheets for tonight. He looked like he was bursting with a secret."

"Shute," Mike said, "is full of secrets, and none of them are nice."

"This secret," said Susan, "must have been a dilly. Shute copied down about ten calls, with the names of the drivers who took them. And then he wanted to know where you were, Mike. He tried to be casual about it, but he was bursting to know if you'd called back since I gave you that last one. You know—that Madame Stephanie."

"I know," Mike said. "Nice jobs you pass out to me. She's dead. Murdered."

"Oh!" Susan said; and then, "Oh, Mike!" Susan's voice sounded queer. "Did—did you have any trouble with her?"

"None, Gorgeous. Some people walked by as she got out of the cab. They must have reported she used an Association taxi. She was killed over in Shute's precinct. I'd guess the sergeant sees a chance to plaster me with a little trouble."

"A *little* trouble?" said Susan faintly. "How much trouble is *murder*, Mike?"

"Depends on the evidence, Lovely. And on the alibi. I'll drive over to the body and see what's on Shute's mind."

"Hadn't you better see your Uncle Cyrus?" Susan suggested uncertainly.

"Keep Uncle Cyrus out of this. He'd give moola for the chance to say, 'I told you so.' "

"I'm worried," Susan said.

"I'm interested," Mike said cheerfully. "She had a monkey that made faces, and a parrot that cried, 'Sucker!' I'd like to know who was the sucker."

"It sounds out of this world, gruesomely," said Susan. "Mike, I knew taxicabs weren't meant for you."

"You watch," said Mike.

"Sucker!" Susan said forcefully.

II

THE fog still whirled greasily under the street lights as Mike wheeled the taxi fast into Elgin Street. He parked, and walked to the morbid aftermath of murder.

A crowd milled slowly about, and spilled over into the street, and now and then stared stolidly as irritable patrolmen ordered them to keep back.

Police and detectives were still on the scene. Photographers and newspapermen were there.

The coroner's office had moved slowly; the body was a shapeless lump on the sidewalk, under a damp, stained canvas.

For a moment Mike thought of bodies in battle, and tired men passing with hardly a glance. Death took different values against different backgrounds.

He shook the thought off. This was murder, a personal and definite fact. Madame Stephanie had been so big and unpleasant, so much a woman who seemed able to take care of herself. Her fear, in a way, had been as strange as the small and defiant monkey, and the jeering parrot.

Mike asked a detective where Sergeant Shute was, and got an idle answer. "Around the corner, I guess, Mack. I seen him start

that way with Lieutenant Hollister. You know Hollister?"

"Gotta gray mustache. Looks like he's in the dough." A thought occurred to the detective. "Hollister don't even look like a cop, if you know what I mean."

"I'll find the lieutenant and get an idea," Mike said, smiling.

The detective smiled back. Men and women had a way of smiling back at Mike Goodenough. His rapt and pleasurable way of staring at the world was harmless and friendly. He usually seemed to be grinning at some joke on himself.

Mike was not smiling as he walked around the corner and saw Sergeant Shute's bulldog-like figure in the fog before the old brownstone house.

With Shute was a man with a close-clipped mustache, rather sporty looking. That would be Lieutenant Hollister. It was easy to see what the detective had meant about Hollister not looking like a detective. Even in the night and the fog, Lieutenant Hollister had a polished look. He might have been a clubman, instead of a homicide man.

THE house windows were still dark. A patrolman lounged with a bored look at the top of the steps, his back to the front door. Death on the sidewalk around the corner had not changed the look of this dingy house. The dark front still had a vague and repellent air, as if visitors were not welcome.

Mike wondered if Madame Stephanie had known how near she was to death when she fumbled with the front door key. He wondered about her destination before she had changed her mind and come here—and why she had changed her mind when her attention had been called to headlights following the taxi.

Sergeant Shute looked up. The sergeant's burly figure stiffened. His voice rasped through the fog with angry satisfaction. "*You,* Goodenough! So you're hanging around? C'm here!"

The thick forefinger on Shute's right hand was bandaged. Mike indicated the finger as he joined the two men. "Bite yourself, Sergeant?"

"Nah! You know I didn't bite myself. Look, how about that dead dame?"

Shute's heavy jaw gave an underslung look to a tight mouth. Shute's heavy black brows bridged a formidable nose. Mike looked at the two men with interest. "Who killed her?"

Sergeant Shute pointed with the bandaged finger. "Lieutenant, this guy owns some taxis."

"You should know," Mike said. "You almost bit yourself when I bought them."

"Ne'mind about that. Roscoe didn't want 'em anyway," Shute snapped. "Lieutenant, this is the guy I had in mind."

"I've read," Mike observed, "that a monkey's bite often gives hydrophobia."

"A wise guy, huh?" Shute said unpleasantly. "Now listen, Goodenough; we got witnesses that the dame come here to this house in an Association hack. I been over to your switchboard. You know what I found, Goodenough?"

"Pretty, isn't she?" Mike said. "For my money, Sergeant, Miss Kidwell is tops."

"I'm talking about murder, wise guy, not dames!"

"I thought you said the lady was dead," Mike suggested with interest.

"Which lady? Nah! Lieutenant, the guy's always like this. You put a finger on him an' he's sittin' on a cloud grinnin' at you. What I'm tellin' you, Goodenough, is this; one of *your* taxis picked up a dame about the time this dame was killed. You get what I'm thinking?"

Mike unwrapped a stick of gum. "Were you thinking that I'm the driver who picked up the lady at 542 Malcome Street?"

"Aha! So you did? That's where she come from!"

LIEUTENANT HOLLISTER spoke, and he seemed mildly amused. "Sergeant Shute stopped at the Malcome Street address on the way back here, Mr. Goodenough. He did find that the dead woman had lived there. Only no one seemed to know anything about her."

"I'm surprised," Mike admitted. "She seemed the kind that neighbors would know about."

"What do you know about her?" Hollister inquired.

"About as much as the neighbors."

"You brought her here," Shute snapped. "You was the last one seen with her. Maybe

you don't know you was seen going to the house with her."

"I'm not surprised," Mike said. "I carried her parrot cage and a bag to the front door. No tip either."

"Bad service, probably—or she was afraid," Shute commented dourly.

"She was unlocking the door when I left her," Mike said. "She didn't ring or knock." Mike looked at the house. "Who lives here?"

"No one," Lieutenant Hollister said. "The house is empty. No furniture. Her bags are inside the front door. Did you carry them in, Goodenough?"

"That," said Mike amiably, "sounds like a leading question, Lieutenant. If the lady was unlocking the front door when I left her, how could I have carried her bags in?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Hollister replied. But he had. Hollister was the soft-talking, polite type who thought of everything. He looked at Mike and he was smiling. "She didn't say anything about her past?"

"Nothing."

"She had only lived at the Malcome Street address five days," Hollister said. "Shute wasn't able to discover where she came from before Malcome Street."

"I still say Goodenough was the last one seen with her," Shute insisted stubbornly.

"So I killed her," Mike suggested, smiling. "Sergeant, as a member of the Bar, I'll have to remind you that hearsay, unsubstantiated facts, guesses, and back-handed wishes, won't impress the D.A., or a trial judge. In other words, button your gums. I'm not impressed."

HOLLISTER was interested. He smoothed one side of his short, sporty, gray mustache before he said doubtfully, "A member of the Bar?"

"Yah, Shute answered vigorously. "He's a nephew of Cyrus Goodenough, the mouthpiece."

"So?" Hollister murmured, regarding Mike with new interest.

The fog drifted about them, and Shute said, "Blacksheep member of the family or somethin'—else why is he hackin' and snatchin' tips in the middle of the night? And drivin' his wore-out heaps around the streets like a screwball. It's a wonder he makes enough to square the tickets he gets. I'm tellin' you, Lieutenant, this guy must have something on his record that'd make a scandal if it was known. Ain't any other reason he'd be hackin' for a living, when he could be counting folding dough from law business his uncle could toss at him."

Mike laughed. "Hasn't been time for you to get hydrophobia from that monkey bite, Shute—but you do a swell job of foaming at the mouth."

"Yah? Listen, how'd you know a monkey bit me?"

"Only a monkey would bite you," Mike guessed cheerfully. "So you don't know what happened to the woman? You have a body, but no motive, no clues, no suspects. Have you searched her luggage?"

"We were going to open her bags," Lieutenant Hollister stated. "Come along, Mr. Goodenough. You seem to know as much about this case as anyone."

"In other words," said Mike, "don't

leave. I'm not under arrest, but you want me close, just in case."

"That," said Lieutenant Hollister with some amusement, "is a leading question. You don't mind if I ignore it?"

The parrot's jeering cry came from under the flowered green silk. *"Hello, suckers—"*

Shute said, "Ain't that a hell of a thing to have around a corpse?"

"Friend of yours?" Mike asked, lifting the cage. "The bird seems to know you."

Shute growled in his throat and put his flashlight beam on the big and heavy suit-

case. "You want me to open this one, Lieutenant? It's heavy enough. Oughta have something inside that'll give us a line on her."

"It's locked. No keys were found in her purse."

"I gotta key that'll open it," Shute bragged. He put the light beam on a heavy bunch of keys, selected a small one and bent over the suitcase.

"The electricity is turned off in the place," Hollister observed to Mike. "She evidently left her things here, walked through the dark house, unlocked the back door and went out that way." Hollister paused. "Or she was forced to go," he said softly.

Sergeant Shute's startled yell rang loud and hollowly through the empty rooms. Shute's backward leap came against Mike's shoulder.

"Lookit *that*. My God, lookit *that!*" Shute yelled. "Stand back while I shoot it!"

Shute backed hard against the wall, dragging out his revolver. The shaking beam of his flashlight was helped by Hollister's flash. The head of a huge snake was rising out of the big suitcase. Rising, rising, higher, higher. A long forked tongue flickered in and out at them.

"Wait a minute!" Mike said sharply. "Don't kill it!" His hand slapped Sergeant Shute's gun hand down. "It's a boa-constrictor," Mike said. "Not poison. If it didn't hurt Madame Stephanie, why should it hurt us?"

"Something in that," Hollister said swiftly. He had drawn a gun also.

"*Suckers!*" the parrot screamed.

"That's us!" Shute said hoarsely. "Boa-constrictors kill people, don't they? Squeeze 'em to death? Eat 'em too. I've read about it. Lookit him!"

The big snake, dark and mottled, and coldly sinuous, had turned its head toward the parrot cage. It swayed slightly, the bulky lower half still in the big suitcase. It seemed to be coldly thinking about the bird in the cage.

"A monkey, a talkin' parrot, an' a man-eatin' snake!" Shute said huskily. "If that ain't a hell of a load for a woman to be lugging around before she gets murdered."

Mike made a quick move; he caught the snake around the neck with both hands, and forced the head fast down into the suitcase. With a slap of his hands he closed the suitcase and snapped the end catches.

"It's a young boa," he said. "Probably not very dangerous; but if it got out on a night like this, there'd be panic through the neighborhood."

"Nice work," Hollister said, putting his gun back under his topcoat. "Well, there we are; one more thing to explain."

"Goodenough handled that thing like he was used to it," Shute decided darkly. "You want to open this small bag, Lieutenant?"

"It's got some white silky veiling in it," Mike said.

"Interesting," Lieutenant Hollister said with a quick look. "You seem well informed, young man."

"The lid came open while I was helping her out of the Malcome Street place," Mike explained.

"Hah!" Shute snorted.

Lieutenant Hollister lifted out the mass of white silky veiling. Released from pressure it billowed out into an astonishing bulk, delicate, fragile.

"What would she be doing with stuff like this?" Hollister murmured, plainly puzzled.

"Reminds me of a hooch dancer," Shute commented. "But that female wasn't built to strip an' shake, even if she was young enough."

"My education is slightly deficient in that quarter," Hollister remarked dryly. "But you sound logical, Shute. Mr. Goodenough —does this—er—stuff, suggest anything to you?"

"Not even cooch dancing," Mike said. "It's white; can't be for mourning. Too fine for mosquito netting.

"Monkey, snake, parrot—and this stuff," Hollister muttered, cramming the delicate billows of white material back in the small overnight case. "An empty unlighted house, five days' stay at her last address, calls herself Madame Stephanie, and she ends up dead around the corner with the monkey on her head waiting to bite someone. What a natural for headlines. Sergeant, let's see what's in that other bag."

"If Shute starts foaming at the mouth from that monkey bite, and snapping at people, you'll have a perfect finish for all this," Mike suggested.

"Yah?" Shute snorted, and he turned from the bag he was opening. "Lieutenant,

you reckon there *was* any danger in that monkey bite? I mean—this phobia stuff?"

"Not tonight," said Hollister impatiently. "Open it, Shute. I'm in a hurry."

Shute had to try two keys before he got the bag open. The contents were wearing apparel. No writing. Packing had been hastily and carelessly done. The floor was littered by the time Hollister had inspected everything.

"Put it back, Shute."

"Suckers!" the parrot screamed.

SHUTE visibly started, and muttered balefully under his breath. Lieutenant Hollister directed his flashlight on the scarlet-flowered green silk of the cage cover. He said nothing; he seemed lost in thought.

"Suppose we walk over the house again, Mr. Goodenough," Hollister suggested courteously.

"Am I being detained?" Mike inquired.

"Not exactly," Hollister said. "There's no charge against you—" Hollister's pause was hardly noticeable. "So far," he finished mildly. "But you know, young man, I have a queer feeling that you might think of something else to tell about all this."

"Sergeant Shute probably agrees with you, sir."

"Hah!" Shute snorted.

They went through the house. The rooms were empty. Dust had gathered. But feet had been before them in the different rooms. That meant nothing, as Hollister remarked. If the house had been for rent, many people might have inspected the interior.

Hollister led the way to the back door, and with his handkerchief, gingerly turned the knob and opened the door. "Fingerprint man hasn't worked this yet," Hollister said, leading the way outside. "She came this way. There is an alley. She turned into the alley, and reached the street, and she was killed there. She was shot in the back, twice. My guess is she didn't even have warning. Probably didn't see who shot her." Hollister paused. "But why did she come this way, in the alley, to the street?"

They were in the alley, and it was dark, the pavement wet underfoot and Hollister's flash stabbing ahead. A policeman was posted at the alley mouth; he turned and saw them coming, and started toward them.

"I'll make a guess why she was back here in the alley," Mike said. "She was going around to the Elgin Street corner to see if she had been followed to the house."

Hollister thought that over for a moment. "Why should she have been followed?"

"Why should she have been killed?"

"You've thought of one good idea, at least," Hollister suggested. "Any more? Did the man who shot her guess what she'd do, and come to meet her at the alley mouth?"

"Find him and ask him," Mike said. "You know, Lieutenant, I have a queer feeling you think I may know all the answers to this. How long are we going to tag around together?"

"Why, you can go now, young man."

"I think I will," Mike decided. "I've a living to make."

"One more thing," Hollister said as they reached the alley mouth. "I'd say the law was a better way of making money."

"You'd be right," Mike agreed. "But more confining. Judges bore me. Courtrooms make me sleepy. Clients annoy me. Briefs tire my eyes. Does that make sense?"

"No," said Hollister bluntly.

"I didn't think it would," Mike said cheerfully. "Good night, Lieutenant."

He suspected that Hollister was staring after him with a puzzled and thoughtful look. Hollister was plainly a man who appreciated the value of money and position. In Hollister's scheme of living there was no sense to a lawyer nephew of Cyrus Goodenough driving a taxicab.

The nearest Association call box was almost a mile from the Elgin Street house, but in the direction Mike had to go anyway. He came in to the curb fast. A corner drug store was closed for the night. Fog drifted past the call phone, fastened to the brick wall at the rear of the corner building. This time Jenny Sadler was on the board, and Jenny said, "Mike Goodenough? Wait a minute, Mike."

Susan Kidwell spoke over the wire a moment later. "I've got to see you, Mike. Let's see, you're at Broadmoor and Sixteenth, aren't you?"

"Haven't time to drive in and get you," Mike said. "Tomorrow, Gorgeous. I just wanted to tell you to keep your lip buttoned if anyone else comes around asking questions about me."

"That's the point, Mike! Someone else has. I can't talk here. One of the boys just parked in front of the garage now. I'll have him run me out to you. Wait there."

"I'll drive down the street to that all-night hamburger joint at Broadmoor and Thirteenth," Mike said. "And don't bring your driver in for coffee. I got heavy thinking to do."

"You're telling *me!*" Susan said. "Wait until I tell *you.*"

III

YOU could see that Susan Kidwell was the most stirring thing that had come from the fog into that all-night eating spot. The counterman tilted his head and neglected the sizzling hamburger he had been about to turn. Two truck drivers, a sailor, a marine, and the male escorts of two overdressed girls, all stared with appreciation when Susan entered with a blue, filmy raincoat over her arm.

Not that Susan was beautiful. Susan was not. Mike did not think Susan particularly good looking. She had been a homely little thing in grammar school, her dark hair in tight braids, her face rather pinched, and long skinny legs always dashing about like a boy. Susan's temper and her tongue even then had been something to respect.

The skinny legs weren't bad at all now. Not bad, even Mike had to admit. Susan was slender. Her dark hair had shaded off into the deepest of chestnut sheens, fine and inclined to be wavy.

Susan no longer dashed recklessly about. But she had a look of being poised for something quick and exciting. There was an electric promise of pleasure and sparkle about Susan. You had a way of forgetting whether Susan might be pretty or not when you caught her eager look and the suggestion of smiling excitement in the red curve of her lips.

That was Susan—and sometimes even Mike, who knew too well Susan's temper and Susan's way in an argument, was held by that look of promise about Susan. It seemed to promise that being alone with Susan would be very pleasant and exciting indeed.

Susan looked around with parted lips, and the two overdressed girls regarded her coldly. Then, walking lightly in her small, sensible-heeled shoes, Susan came to the end of the counter where Mike was sitting.

"Coffee?" Mike said, and Susan nodded, and the counterman served quickly, grinning at Susan's bright smile, and all the other males in the small place looked at Mike enviously.

Mike was not even aware of all that. This was only Susan Kidwell, who'd always lived around the corner. "You're late," Mike said. "Like I expected."

"I should have let you stew in your own trouble," said Susan.

"What trouble?"

"Are you innocent?" asked Susan. "Or just dumb?" And then Susan said, "Don't tell me. I know."

"Drink your coffee," Mike ordered. "I'm in a hurry."

Susan smiled and took a cookie from a glass jar in front of her, and munched on the cookie in a healthy, hungry way, and drank her coffee, and said nothing.

Mike scowled at her. "Well?"

"Well?"

"First you're in a lather," said Mike. "Now you're sleeping on me. Let's have it. Who was asking questions about me?"

"A girl," said Susan.

Mike looked his disgust. "All this waiting because of a girl! What's wrong with a girl asking questions about me?" Mike grinned. "After all, can I help it if I'm popular?"

"This girl," said Susan calmly, "had a gun in her purse." Susan dunked one edge of her cookie slightly. "I think she was ready to use it."

MIKE asked no more questions until they were out in the fog, beside his taxi. "Now give," he said.

"She looked," said Susan reflectively, "like an angel. A pale, delicate, poisonous angel."

"Poetry you were never good at," said Mike. "So she was a wash-out, pale blonde, with a gun in her purse, and a yen in her peepers to make Michael her bull's-eye. What did she say? What did she want? How'd she happen to be there at your switchboard asking about me?"

"Jake, at the gas pumps, sent her in, just before Jenny got there," said Susan. "She

didn't tell me her name. I tried to get it before she left, and she said it didn't matter."

"You're killing me with suspense," Mike protested. *"What did she want?"*

"She wanted," said Susan, "to know which one of our taxis, and which driver, called at 542 Malcome Street, just before ten this evening. And like a goop I told her. And to make it worse, I said that the woman was dead."

"Dumb!"

"I know," admitted Susan. "But at least it startled her so badly she dropped her purse. It was a white linen purse with a waxed wooden handle. Natural finish and hand-carved."

"I," said Mike patiently, "don't care how her handle was carved. You frightened her. She dropped her purse. *Give!"*

"When I picked it up, I felt the gun inside. But I knew what was there before I touched the purse. You know, the way it *thumped* hard on the floor."

"I know," Mike said. "And it might have been a shoe tree or a length of pipe or an old pool ball, to thump like that."

"It was a gun," said Susan, unruffled. "She almost snatched the purse from my hand. She didn't ask me how I knew the woman was dead, or if the police had talked to me. She said the woman's death was no business of hers, and she went out like she wanted to run."

"That all?"

"Isn't that enough?"' asked Susan indignantly. "Didn't you hear me say she had a gun, and she wanted badly to find you?"

"But if she didn't know Madame Stephanie was dead—"

"She knew," Susan said tartly. "Her only surprise was to hear that I knew." Susan shifted her blue raincoat to the other arm and said briskly, "I don't like anything about this, Mike. I—I think there's more coming."

"Have a nightmare about it after you get to sleep," Mike invited cheerfully.

"You're being pig-headedly stubborn," snapped Susan. "What are you going to do?"

"Take you home," said Mike. "Get in."

A little later Mike drove fast on Grafton Avenue, alone. He was not being followed. Mike was not sure himself why he had not told Lieutenant Hollister about the Grafton Avenue address, where Madame Stephanie had wanted to go in a hurry, before she changed to the Elgin Street address.

There was a promise of mystery here and excitement. The blonde with a gun in her purse made it all the more promising. Mike was whistling past his teeth when he located the Grafton address, and he took the front steps two at a time.

The house was red brick, two stories high. It was a plain and rather old house, with others like it crowding in on either side. The upper windows showed light, and when Mike pushed the bell button, the buzzer sound was faint back in the house.

A DOG barked inside, and came to the door, growling, snarling. A big dog, by the sound and volume, and savage. Steps came down the stairs, and when the door opened one of the biggest dogs Mike had ever seen snarled and slavered through the thin screen wire at him.

"Well, what is it?" an irritable demand asked back of the dog.

Light had not been turned on inside. Mike had to look closely to make out the speaker. It was a small man, a thin man, even in the belted bulk of a cotton bathrobe. His hair was rumpled, he wore glasses, and he had evidently been asleep.

"Has Madame Stephanie been here tonight?" Mike asked.

"Oh, my Lord! Another one! I'm getting fed up with this! No!" The small man was almost shouting. "I haven't seen her! I don't want to see her! Get out!"

"But you know her?"

"Does anyone know her?" the small man said loudly. "Get out, sucker!" The door slammed. The dog reared up against it, barking, and the door shook with the big beast's weight.

"Sucker?" Mike said aloud. He punched the bell button and held his finger on it until the door was jerked open again.

"So you won't let me sleep?" the small man shrilled. "Me that's got to get to work early in the morning." He was fumbling at the screen door latch. "Run him off, Spike!"

"She's dead," Mike said hurriedly, and he lifted his voice again and put his hand against the screen door so it could not open. "You hear me? She's dead!"

The little man stopped pushing against the door. "Dead?" he said.

"Murdered," Mike told him.

"When?"

"A couple of hours ago."

The little man gripped the big dog's collar and pulled back. "I'm not surprised," he said. "She was asking for it." He slammed the door.

"Hey!" Mike called. "Open up. Got to talk to you."

The dog leaped against the door, barking furiously. But the door did not open, not even when Mike rang the bell steadily.

"This," said Mike disgustedly, "ties it." He considered trying the back door and abandoned the idea. When he stepped out on the front walk, the upstairs windows were dark.

"Sucker is right," Mike said disgustedly. He was irritable himself as he walked back to the taxi and lighted a cigarette before starting the motor.

THIS was one for Lieutenant Hollister, and there would be explaining to do to Hollister. That gray-mustached homicide man would want to know why he hadn't been told of the Grafton Avenue address in the first place.

Mike decided to put it off until morning. He drove home. His mother was asleep. Mike had a last cigarette, thoughtfully, before turning in, and then he slept, and dreamed about a jungle full of great snakes and parrots that flitted about talking to him. When his eyes opened, his mother was shaking him awake, and sunshine was pouring through the south window.

"You jumped clear across the bed when I touched you," Mother Goodenough said accusingly. "Let's see your tongue, Michael."

"I thought you were a snake, darling."

"I like that. A snake." Mother Goodenough had white hair, a saintly expression, and was incurably addicted to wrestling matches, prize fights, and her church work. "Your uncle Cyrus just telephoned. He wants to see you at his office at once, Michael."

"I don't want to see him," Mike grumbled, sitting up and rumpling his hair.

"I can stand taxicabs as long as you can," said Mrs. Goodenough firmly. "But, Mike, I'll not have you quarreling with Cyrus. All he wants to do is help you. He's worried about you."

"He worries me."

"He sounded," said Mother Goodenough comfortably, "as if someone had hung a mouse on his eye. I haven't heard Cyrus in such a state in I don't know when. He wouldn't tell me what was wrong."

"Wrong?" said Mike.

"Something is wrong. Hurry up and get to his office. He *is* your uncle, you know."

"He won't let me forget it," Mike said with resignation.

The law officers of Cyrus Goodenough occupied half a corridor on the eighth floor of the Commercial National Building. The yearly rental was staggering. But then Cyrus Goodenough's fees were staggering, and there were plenty of them.

Mike eyed the corridor with distaste. This, once, had been his destiny. Like a strait-jacket. You punched the time clock of opportunity no less strictly here than on a factory payroll.

"Miss Parsons, in the outer office, said with pleased surprise, "Good morning, Mr. Michael." Miss Parsons regarded Mike with approval. She always had. "Your uncle," Miss Parsons said, "is expecting you. Go right in."

"The Bear's Den," Mike said, "and raw meat for breakfast, probably."

Miss Parsons looked slightly scandalized. Cyrus Goodenough was a master of stubborn juries, a witness baiter without peer, a clever and canny marksman in the jungles of the law, and a growing legend in his profession. His staff regarded him with respectful affection and some awe.

Cyrus Goodenough heaved up from his broad desk when Mike entered the office. He was a big man, with a bear-like look, well groomed. He grunted, "So you finally got here?"

"Didn't even stop for breakfast," Mike said. "Your health, I trust, is well this morning."

"No thanks to you," said Cyrus Goodenough. "Read the morning paper?"

"Not yet."

"Read my paper." Cyrus crossed to the tall bank of windows that looked down on Main Street. Out of his calm came a sudden demand. "And then tell me what the hell you know about that dead woman! I said no

good would come of this taxicab foolishness! Now look what you're mixed up in—and the man is *my* client!"

IV

A BLUE pencil had ringed the first-page heading, two columns wide:

TYCOON HELD IN BIZARRE MURDER

Walter Hemphill, President of National Associated Industries, was taken into custody at an early hour this morning, and charged with the murder, under mysterious circumstances, of a woman calling herself Madame Stephanie. Commissioner of Police Van Kirke refused to discuss the charges against Hemphill, other than to state the police would not have acted without evidence that seemed conclusive. The body of the murdered woman was found——

Mike whistled his astonishment. "I wouldn't have believed it. Hemphill killing that dame. How did he get hooked up with a circus like that? Snake, parrot, monkey on her shoulder!"

"I," said Cyrus Goodenough grimly, "have been up since four A.M. Hemphill still hasn't been admitted to bail. And *you,* I learn an hour ago, are the last man to have seen the woman alive. You and this broken-down taxicab business you insist on wasting your time on!"

"The last man who saw her alive was the killer," Mike reminded. "How did Hemphill tangle with her? What's the evidence?"

"A letter," Cyrus answered grimly. "A special delivery letter received by the police at two A.M., charging Hemphill with doing the killing. And Hemphill foolishly admitted he'd seen the woman earlier in the evening and threatened her."

"Someone had her worried," Mike said. "She was in a state when I picked her up."

"Hemphill's company paid me thirty-two thousand last year in legal fees," Cyrus Goodenough growled. "Almost as much the year before. He didn't kill the woman—and we're going to prove it."

"For how much?" Mike asked absently, reading further in the newspaper.

He missed the scowl Cyrus gave him. "For nothing, if necessary, young man! You got Hemphill into this, in a way. Now you'll help get him out."

Mike stepped to his uncle's telephone and asked Miss Parsons to get Commissioner of Police Van Kirke. He grinned across the telephone at Cyrus Goodenough. "Your reasoning is lousy," Mike said. "But I know who can probably get you and your client out of this if Hemphill is really innocent."

Commissioner Van Kirke came on the wire. "This," said Mike, "is counsel for Walter Hemphill. No, I'm only speaking for Cyrus Goodenough. If you'll question a man who lives at 1438 Grafton Avenue, you'll probably learn who really killed that Madame Stephanie."

"What the devil!" Uncle Cyrus exploded. "Here—"

"Get it? 1438 Grafton," said Mike and hung up. "*If* Hemphill is innocent, and this clears him, my fee will be five grand out of your loot."

"What do you know about this business, Michael?"

"I," said Mike, "know a lot of people around town." Mike grinned. "Including the man who broke your schnozzle outside the old South Street ball park, some years ago."

"Why that loud-mouthed loafer!" Uncle Cyrus snapped, feeling his nose mechanically. "He had to butt me with his thick head." Uncle Cyrus smiled. "So Andy Keller still remembers? I'll have to look him up and see who can out-lie the other." Cyrus pointed a thick finger. "Sit down. You may be more help to me than I thought on this case."

"It's costing you five grand," Mike reminded, "instead of the five grand salary you wanted me to take for a year of sweating on your briefs."

"At your age," said Uncle Cyrus, "I would have thought that a fortune. Salary isn't what counts around here. It's the experience and prestige."

"I'm full of experience," Mike said. "And I haven't got a brass-hat mentality. I'm a low-brow. Kinda dumb and happy."

"This war—" Uncle Cyrus muttered, leaning back in his desk chair and shaking his head sadly. "I hope it hasn't affected all the young men like it has you." Uncle Cyrus became brisk. "At least you're low-

brow enough. You have an astonishing acquaintance among the other low-brows of this city. It just might be you're the man to do the background work on this Hemphill case."

"My fee for solving it will be five grand," Mike reminded again.

Cyrus lighted a cigar. "Hemphill's wife got him into this. Unfortunate woman; something should have been done about her before this. Spirits."

"Hooch?" Mike asked with interest.

"Spiritualism," his uncle growled. "All nonsense, of course. Mr. Hemphill believes she has been in touch with her daughter, Dorothy, who died at the age of fourteen, some years ago."

Mike snapped fingers so sharply his uncle started. "Ectoplasm! Am I dumb?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Very fine white veiling," Mike explained. "Yards and yards of it. Madame Stephanie had it when she got into my taxi. The stuff can be made to look like smoky vapor in a dark room. It's supposed to be the presence of the departed. Mediums use it."

"The Stephanie woman called herself a medium," Cyrus Goodenough admitted. "She produced the spirit of Dorothy Hemphill, to the mother's satisfaction. I can't say what tricks she used. They must have been convincing."

"The more I hear, the more I see," Mike said. "Madame Stephanie's parrot had been taught to call, "Come in, suckers." Mrs. Hemphill evidently wasn't the only sucker Madame had on the hook. And if you ask me, I know the guy who taught the parrot. The cops should be collaring him at his job or at that Grafton Avenue address about now."

"Who is the man?"

"I don't know," Mike said. "Madame Stephanie gave that address last night, and then switched to the Elgin Street address when she thought we were being followed."

"Followed?" Cyrus frowned. "It might be well not to repeat that. Walter Hemphill admits calling on Madame Stephanie and threatening to have her run out of town. Mrs. Hemphill had been giving the Stephanie woman sizeable sums of money. Her last act was to buy Madame Stephanie that house on Elgin Street. She told her husband that her daughter had requested it. You see what Hemphill was trying to stop? His wife has money of her own, and she was on the way to being bilked of all of it."

"What did Madame Stephanie tell him?"

"She said she had no control over what the spirits did."

"And all he threatened to do was have her run out of town?"

"He swears that's all."

"Where was he at the time Madame Stephanie was killed?"

"Says he was driving around in the fog trying to think how to avoid publicity and yet end the miserable business."

"No alibi then?"

"None."

"Who sent the letter that got him arrested?"

"The letter was mailed at the main post office at 12:40 last night," Cyrus Goodenough said. "Mrs. Hemphill admits sending it. She's under a doctor's care right now. Hysteria. But she's sane enough to keep swearing Hemphill must have killed Madame Stephanie. She blames him for cutting her off from communication with her daughter."

Mike whistled again. "No alibi—and his own wife tipping the law and swearing he did the killing. It'll take nice courtroom work to refute that."

THE telephone rang. Cyrus Goodenough answered it. He said "Yes!" impatiently. He listened. His face got red. "Very interesting," he said, and his voice had a stifled note of emotion that made Mike watch intently. "We don't know anything about it," Uncle Cyrus said loudly. "No—I don't give a tinker's damn what you do about it!"

Cyrus slammed the handset down. His face was still red. He stood up, and he had a savage bear-like look that brought Mike to his feet.

His uncle's thick forefinger shook menacingly.

"That," said Uncle Cyrus, "is what you give me for five thousand dollars. The police have your man at the Grafton Avenue house. He's dead. His big dog is dead. They were both killed some time last night. Around midnight or a little later. Walter Hemphill is being charged with that crime

too. The dead man is Madame Stephanie's husband!"

"I'm confused," Mike admitted.

"What am I?" Cyrus Goodenough snarled. "Are you trying to make sure my client hangs?"

"I'll have to think it over," Mike decided.

"You'd better think fast," Cyrus warned darkly. "Commissioner Van Kirke wants to know what we know about the man—*and* why we thought he might know who killed Madame Stephanie." Uncle Cyrus stopped. His eyes narrowed. "Did you see that dead man last night?"

"The less you know, the less you'll have to deny," Mike suggested. "I'll get in touch with you later." He turned at the door. "The fee," he said, "will still be five thousand."

What Cyrus Goodenough said brought Miss Parsons' eyes wide as Mike passed her desk. A little later Mike worried a late breakfast at Ye Griddle Shoppe on the Highland corner of Five Points. Susan Kidwell watched him.

MIKE had picked Susan up at her house. She had read about Walter Hemphill. On the way to Ye Griddle Shoppe, Mike had told her about Mrs. Hemphill. He had told her about the big dog and its owner, and Cyrus Goodenough's interest in the matter.

Susan was not sympathetic. "I told you there was more to this than appeared," Susan reminded. "If you'd taken me with you last night—"

"That," Mike said, buttering a corner of crisp waffle, "is not the point. The question is, did Hemphill run amok last night? Is his wife's accusation correct?"

Susan closed her eyes. She looked fresh and young this morning. Sunshine through the big plate-glass window drew soft glints in Susan's hair. A trolley clanged outside. Automobile horns blew. The traffic cop's whistle shrilled. Susan looked calm and sure as she opened her eyes.

"Of course not," Susan said. "Mrs. Hemphill is a hysterical idiot. She wouldn't give houses to a cheap medium if she wasn't off balance with grief and mother-love that refuses to accept the loss of her daughter."

"You make it sound simple," Mike said grudgingly. He looked out at the sunshine which had displaced last night's drizzly fog. "Things look more sane this morning."

"Mr. Hemphill," said Susan, "is a wealthy man. If his wife gave away all her money, he'd still have a bank account. He wouldn't be so successful if he were not level-headed. He was angry. He wanted to stop his wife, even at the risk of some unpleasantness. But he wouldn't do it with a brace of first-degree murders. Why should he? You can bet he's watched cost accounting in his business affairs. He'd do the same thing in his personal life. Murder would risk too much red ink for a man like Hemphill."

"His wife's special delivery letter to the police doesn't suggest that," Mike reminded.

"Hysteria," Susan said. "They'd quarreled about Madame Stephanie. It's more than possible Madame Stephanie telephoned Mrs. Hemphill as soon as Walter Hemphill left that Malcome Street apartment. Mrs. Hemphill was striking blindly at the one thing she could hurt; the one visible object that had cut her off from the supposed contact with her dead daughter."

Mike grinned across the table. "Gorgeous," he said, "you sound as learned as a professor."

"You'll learn," said Susan calmly.

Mike regarded her innocently. "How," he asked gently, "did Mrs. Hemphill know before 12:40 last night that Madame Stephanie had been killed? Spirits tell her?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Susan admitted.

"Why," asked Mike, "was Madame Stephanie so upset when I suggested we were being followed by another car? Hemphill's threat of running her out of town wouldn't affect her that much."

"He could have threatened to do worse than get her out of town."

"Hardly, if you believe he was so careful about the trouble he might make for himself. Don't forget the red-ink."

"You're cross-examining me, Mike."

"Objection overruled," Mike said. "Madame Stephanie was afraid. But what did she do?"

"She died," said Susan.

"Pay attention," Mike ordered. "This is important. She was afraid—but she changed her destination and went to an empty house,

instead of to her husband's house, where she might have some protection from danger. That big dog alone would have guarded her."

"She might have been afraid of her husband or the dog."

"She wasn't so afraid when she started there from Malcome Street."

Susan nodded. "Her husband certainly didn't kill her, because if he did, who killed him?"

"Exactly," Mike said. "Who?" He ate another bit of waffle. "Which brings us to the babe who was lugging a gun last night and asking who toted the Madame from Malcome Street. How do we find her?"

"It might be best not to find her," said Susan.

"For five thousand dollars I'd find a gross of pistol-packin' mammas," said Mike. "The hacks I can buy with sugar like that. I'll be Mr. Taxicab before you know it."

"You could be Judge Goodenough some day—and you'd rather have a greasy collar and a pocketful of tips," Susan charged.

"And fun," Mike said, smiling. "Don't forget the fun, Sweet. Judges sit like a taxi driver—but they never go anywhere."

"Moronic reasoning," said Susan darkly.

"If I," said Mike, "was a medium with a pet spirit that was good for lashings of gift money and real estate, what would I be afraid of?"

"Blackmail?" Susan suggested.

"You can't blackmail an ectoplasm or a spirit, Dopey. You wouldn't take off with your snake and your parrot and monkey, and get the creeps when you were followed, just because the sucker's husband said nasty words. Not with the wife tied to your ectoplasm. You had all your tonnage rolling fast over a highball road—and *boom*—washout."

"There must have been other suckers," guessed Susan. "Even the parrot had been taught to welcome them."

"By Madame's husband, evidently. He didn't seem to approve of Madame's pin-money work. Some other husband could have killed Madame—but I don't think so."

"Why not, Mike?"

"Because Madame's husband was killed too. Get it? If a sucker was knocking off Madame, why go for her husband too, when he was evidently against the racket anyway?"

Mike shook his head. He sighed. "No, it's something else. If I were a medium, what would I be afraid of?"

"If *I* were getting free real estate," said Susan, "all *I'd* be afraid of would be losing my graft."

Mike gagged on the waffle bite he was swallowing. He had a coughing fit, and he had to wipe his eyes, and he was grinning as he put the handkerchief back.

"*What* a brain! What a team we make. I do the thinking and you speak the answers. It couldn't be better if I were a medium and you were my ectoplasm."

"You're usually in a trance, I'll admit," said Susan tartly. "What answer did I speak?"

"Competition," said Mike earnestly. He was leaning forward, sparked with excitement. "Get it? Madame Stephanie had a swell graft. A gold mine. She'd be afraid of losing it. Someone was after that dough the Madame was getting. So what do we do?"

"You," said Susan, "are going around in circles and getting nowhere."

"We hunt ectoplasm," Mike said, getting up.

"It's a psychoneurosis," Susan decided. "Mike, can't you take a pill and sleep it off?"

"I need your help," Mike said. "Come on."

V

HALF an hour later Mike closed a telephone directory and a city directory in the office of the Taxi Association.

"Twenty-three prospects," Mike said, scanning a penciled list. "And not a palm-reader, mind-reader, astrologer, phrenologist, or fortune teller among 'em."

"I'm merely humoring you," Susan reminded.

Duke Willis, day-boss of the noisy Association garage, under the same room, came in, wiping his hands on an oily rag. "You get that note in your mail slot, Mike?" And Duke added, "There was a cop named Shute lookin' for you awhile ago. That's what I come in to tell you. He wanted to know if you checked in last night."

"Who left the note?" Mike asked.

"Izzy. There was a dame around here

early, before I come on. She told Izzy she was lookin' for a compact she left in one of your hacks. Wasn't sure which one. Izzy didn't find nothin' turned in. She talked Izzy into lookin' through your two jobs that was on the floor. No compact. She tells Izzy the thing is a present from her mother, an' is worth ten bucks to her. Twenty if it takes twenty to find it. She tells Izzy twenty bucks for a two-buck compact."

"What did she look like?"

"Izzy says kind of a hard dame in her forties. He stuck her name an' telephone number in your mail slot."

"Thanks, Duke."

Susan said, "Twenty dollars for a two-dollar compact. She loved her mother."

Mike hadn't noticed the smudged slip of paper in his mail slot. He showed it to Susan. Izzy had scrawled, *Lost compact. Reward. Mrs. Bella Phalen, phone 46-3123.*

"Let me see that list we made, Mike," Susan said suddenly.

Susan ran her tinted fingernail down the list she had helped dig out of the directory and telephone book. "I thought so. Here's the same phone number. Only the name is Dame Serena Fitzgordan, Spiritualist Advisor."

"It still spells ectoplasm to me," said Mike. "Honey chile, we're highballing on the rainbow and I can see the pot of gold. Let me have your compact."

"Oh, no you don't," said Susan. "I paid three ninety-nine for my compact and I can't use a rainbow on my lips."

"Give," said Mike. "You've got rainbows in your cheeks and moonshine in your eyes. That's no psychoneurosis."

"It's hot air," Susan said, opening her purse. "Do I get a new compact if I lose this one?"

"A twenty-dollar one."

"That, I'm afraid, is hot air too," said Susan. "But I'll learn."

Dame Serena Fitzgordan lived on Albany Terrace, which was still on the swank side, even if aging and on the down-grade as a residential neighborhood.

Mike parked the taxi around the corner. "Just for luck," he said, "ring the Dame's doorbell and hunt a little spiritualistic advice. You've lost your dear husband—no, you haven't got a wedding ring—make it your brother."

"I haven't got a brother."

"He died," said Mike, "of smallpox, two years ago, age seventeen. Lately, last night also, you had vivid dreams in which he stands there talking to you. Only you can't understand his words. You're troubled. You're worried."

"I'm hungry," said Susan. She started to get out, and paused, seriously, "Mike, I am worried. We're dabbling in something very serious. Have you realized it?"

Mike caught Susan's mood. For a moment he had a grave and almost stern look, that reminded Susan of an intense young attorney facing judge and jury.

"I've seen too much death to be amused by it, Suzie."

"I know you're not amused, Mike."

"Death is a miserable business any way you look at it," Mike said slowly. He had started to roll a cigarette. His blue and usually innocent-looking eyes were staring through the windshield. "Murder is worse. But I've been wondering," Mike said, "if it isn't much worse to roost like a greedy vulture on the love and heartbreak that go on after death." Mike lit the neatly rolled cigarette. "I feel very sorry for Walter Hemphill and his wife. I'd like to help them if possible." Mike turned his head. "There'll be other mothers and wives and sweethearts, who can be handled as easily as Mrs. Hemphill. Perhaps even more profitably. Yes, I think it's very serious. Two murders already. If you don't like the idea, Suzie, sit here in the cab, and I'll go and see about that lost compact."

"Who said I didn't like the idea?" Susan said, opening the door. "If we meet at her house, I'll not know you."

MIKE waited ten minutes, and then he drove to the Albany Terrace address. The houses were weathered brownstone and red brick, with a few newer apartment buildings. Rooms were not yet for rent on Albany Terrace; a slightly faded air of grace and dignity hung over the neighborhood. But many of the old and best families who once had lived on the Terrace had moved.

There was nothing different about the brownstone house whose steps Mike mounted, save a small brass nameplate on the door. *Dame Serena Fitzgordan.* Mike

pushed his driver's cap to a jaunty tilt, flipped the end of his cigarette off the porch, and pushed the bell button.

The door was opened so quickly he guessed his arrival must have been watched. For an instant Mike gaped. He was looking into a reception hall that was lined on ceiling, and down to dark polished floor edges, with black velvet. A single small crystal globe hung from a thin silver chain, and was not lighted.

The woman who stood there was dressed in black, her sleeves reaching to her wrists and the black collar of her dress leaving only a small white V opening in front. Iron-gray hair was upswept in an old-fashioned pompadour. She was a slim, tall, black-clad, rather stately figure, and her features were firm and composed and cold. She stood silently.

"Mrs. Phalen?" Mike said, cap in hand, and his wide grin friendly and inquiring.

"You have the wrong address, young man."

"I found a compact in my taxi," Mike said. "A lady asked about it at the garage. She offered a reward."

"Let me see the compact."

"Her name," said Mike, "was Mrs. Phalen."

"What made you think Mrs. Phalen might live here?"

MIKE had wondered if that question might not be asked. He had the answer ready. "The telephone company will give an address if you know the number of the telephone." Mike chuckled. "I thought if there was a reward, I might as well stop by and collect it. Sorry to have bothered you with someone else's business, lady."

She had not smiled or moved. But she said sharply, "Wait." And then she said more slowly, "I know Mrs. Whalen slightly. I think I remember her compact. Let me see the one you found."

Mike held out the compact. She took it. "Wait. I'll get my glasses and examine it." She closed the door.

Mike rolled another cigarette. He was whistling softly between his teeth in good humor when the door was opened again. The same woman gave him the compact.

"This is not the one, I'm sure. Thank you for your trouble."

"Where can I find this Mrs. Phalen? She gave this telephone number."

"I can't tell you, young man. Perhaps she means to get in touch with me today. I'll inform her."

"She offered twenty bucks," Mike said. "I can use that. She can find me at the Association garage, or I've got a phone at home."

She closed the door. Mike drove off, and when he was parked at the spot where Susan had left him, he took the compact off the seat, wrapped it carefully in his handkerchief, and put it in the dash pocket. In another ten minutes Susan was back.

"What a place!" Susan exclaimed. "It's creepy. Drive me through some sunshine. Was that you at her door?"

"No luck," Mike said. "The Phalen woman doesn't live there. Who was that vision in black? The Fitzgordan woman?"

Susan nodded. "It was very strange, Mike. She led me into a small room done in dark blue, with just two chairs. I told her about my brother. She was sympathetic. She said undoubtedly it was a sign. He was trying to get in touch with me. And then suddenly she excused herself and went out, as if she'd caught a signal."

"Me, at the door," Mike guessed.

"No. I heard the door buzzer a minute or so later. It was some time after that before the Fitzgordan woman returned. She had changed. She was cold and abrupt. She said that she had tried to make contact with her spirit control, and she had failed, and there was nothing she could do for me. She advised me to find someone else." Susan said, "I'm sorry; we muffed it some way."

"We're doing fine," Mike differed. "Did you see anyone else in the house?"

"I thought I heard a man's voice. I might have been mistaken."

"I was hoping you'd see someone else."

"All I saw was the woman in black—and I still don't know what changed her so abruptly."

A SIREN wailed up behind the taxi; a squad car waved them to the curb. "Take this list we made," Mike said to Susan. "Call another taxi, one of mine if you can get it, and visit some of these names. Use the same story. Say that the Fitzgordan woman was your first choice, and maybe you should have gone to her. You might get a

competitor talking about her. Find out anything you can."

"What are you going to do?" Susan asked.

One of the squad car men got out. "You Mike Goodenough?"

"Yes."

"You're wanted at Headquarters. Follow us in an' don't get funny about it."

"The lady," Mike said, "is in a hurry."

"She'll have to get another hack."

"Where's my compact?" Susan remembered.

"I'll need it."

"I lose my compact and have to walk back —which is about par for you, Mike Goodenough," was Susan's farewell.

LIEUTENANT HOLLISTER was at Headquarters. He came into the room where a detective was arguing baseball with Mike, and Hollister looked as if he had just stepped out of his favorite club, despite the fact that he had probably been up most of the night. The detective departed at Hollister's gesture, and Mike grinned.

"I went home to sleep last night," Mike said. "Took my cab home, instead of to the garage. The man and his dog were alive when I knocked on his door. I told him that Madame Stephanie had been murdered, and he said she had been asking for it, and he wasn't surprised. He slammed the door, turned out the lights, and wouldn't open up again. I went there because Madame Stephanie gave that address first, and then changed her mind and gave the Elgin Street address. And so, this morning, I naturally thought the dead man might know who had killed his wife." Mike smiled. "Was there anything else you wanted to know."

"I should put a charge against you," Hollister said bluntly. "Why didn't you report all that?"

"I did, in a way. This morning. To Commissioner Van Kirke."

"I mean last night."

"No one asked me." Mike opened his folded handkerchief in a palm and showed the polished compact. "Might be some fingerprints on this that would prove interesting. It's only a suggestion. The compact belongs to a friend of mine. I borrowed it to get the prints."

Hollister pressed a button on the wall. The same detective stepped back into the room. Hollister gave him the handkerchief and compact.

"Have the prints on this checked. If there are any good ones, see what the F.B.I. can tell us about them. It's rush." When the man went out, Hollister smoothed his gray mustache and demanded, "Where did you get those prints?"

"Sorry—"

"Like me to hold you for questioning?"

"As one of the lawyers for Walter Hemphill, I'll be a hot prisoner," Mike suggested.

"What are you, a lawyer or a taxi driver?" Hollister asked with some asperity. "Are you working with us, or against us?"

"Never against the law," Mike said virtuously. "As a member of the Bar, I'm only interested in justice."

"Rats!" said Hollister, his composure rapidly ruffling. "I've seen a lot of things—but I never saw a lawyer doing business out of a taxicab." Hollister stopped, gnawed his lip, shook his head. "If I hold you, I'll have an uproar about obstructing Walter Hemphill's defense. If I let you on the loose around town, you're in the middle of trouble every time—and withholding facts from us. Like that compact."

"Fingerprints on the compact are a guess at the moment, not a fact," Mike reminded. "I've turned them over to you."

"Get out," Hollister said. "You'll have *me* guilty of something if you keep on talking."

Mike paused at the door. "On behalf of Walter Hemphill, I'll probably want another inspection of that Elgin Street house."

"Get a court order," said Hollister. "We're through with the place, and as far as I'm concerned, it stays locked up until I see a reason for going in myself."

"I'll show you the court order when I'm ready," Mike promised.

From Headquarters Mike drove to the Elgin Street house. He spent some minutes searching the back of the taxi, for the second time that day. Definitely there was not a compact anywhere inside.

A fat man was sitting on the steps of the house next door to the one Madame Stephanie had entered. He was a very fat man with his shirt sleeves rolled up, collar open, and a handkerchief in one fist. Now and then he dabbed at his wide and perspiring face.

Mike sauntered to the steps, rolling a cigarette and smiling.

"Seen a lady waiting for a taxi?" Mike asked.

"Nope." The fat man wheezed as he talked. He mopped his face again. His eyes were sunk in folds of fat, his head was partly bald and bright pink in the bald area. "She live in that house?" he wheezed, nodding next door.

"Don't know where she lives," Mike said, pushing the driver's cap back on his bleached hair. "Supposed to be waiting on the curb in front of that address."

"Newspaper woman, likely," the fat man decided. He sighed. "Guess you read about the woman who got killed last night? Had a monkey."

"Yes."

"She was gonna move in there next door. Maybe she was killed in there an' carried out. Me sleeping right next to it."

"Did you know the woman?"

"Talked to her once, about two weeks ago. I asked her to have the mechanics stop bangin' on my bedroom wall. I got insomnia. Can't sleep at night much. Don't get my sleep in the afternoon, I'm a wreck." The fat man mopped his face. "She told me to mind my own business an' she'd mind hers."

"What were they building?"

"Don't know. Sounded like they was tearing the house down."

"Sounds queer to me," Mike said. "Who did you tell about it?"

"No one. Wasn't asked." The fat man shook his head. "I took my key a coupla days later an' looked around inside. Never did see what they was building."

"Your key fits that door?"

"Folks used to live in there left a spare key with us. Usta lose theirs. They never asked for their key back."

"I'd like to look around inside." Mike added with a grin, "If the police know you have a key, they might wonder if you were in there last night."

"Oh, my gosh! I never thought of that. I'll learn to keep my mouth shut." The fat man met Mike's grin. He was uneasy. "Place is empty," he mumbled. "I guess it can't harm nothing." He stood up with an effort, walked heavily inside, and came back with a door key.

"If anyone comes," Mike promised, "I won't say where I got the key."

He was in the vacant house some moments later. The bags and the parrot cage had been removed. A stale odor of tobacco smoke remained from the activity of last night. His movements echoed hollowly through the empty rooms as he went upstairs.

Mike had forgotten to ask where the fat man's bedroom was. He recalled the dust on the floors last night and was not surprised to find a back bedroom whose floor was almost free of dust. The room had obviously been cleaned recently.

The wall paper had not been renewed. A large clothes closet held the faint smell of fresh varnish. Mike struck a match and traced the odor to the wood-paneled back wall of the closet.

Top and sides of the closet were paneled in cedar, that had been in place a long time. Narrow wood stripping covered the panel joints. Only by looking closely did Mike find that two of the wood strips on the back wall had recently been replaced by wood that was not cedar. The new strips had been carefully tinted to match the older wood. The two strips had evidently been too short. They had been filled out at the bottom with shorter lengths. A cross strip ran between the joints.

"Could be," Mike murmured.

The paneling sounded hollow when he rapped. The point of his pocket knife took only a minute to bring out a small concealed door whose edges had been hidden by the new short strips. Match light gleamed on the polished front of a small steel wall safe set back in the opening.

Mike used his handkerchief over fingertips and the safe knob. The combination was locked.

Half an hour later a locksmith looked at a key impression in a wad of chewing gum. "Take about ten minutes to make a key, mister. It ain't a hard one to duplicate."

"I'll wait," Mike said.

VI

SOME five hours after that Mike sat at a table in a noisy back room on Dock Road. A juke box was playing loudly. A drunk was arguing with the bartender. Sea-

men off a ship docked nearby were laughing and shouting at each other in a foreign tongue. Croppy Bemis sat across the table behind two empty beer bottles. Croppy lacked part of his right ear. Croppy needed a shave and haircut, a new suit of clothes, and a few more drinks to quiet his shaking hands, and he said in a whiskey husk, "Nuh-nuh! I ain't in no shape to open no safe!"

"I've been looking for you all afternoon," said Mike. "Did I or didn't I keep you out of stir three years ago?"

"That ain't the point," Croppy husked. His eyes were bloodshot. Croppy's hair was getting gray. He was a fox-like little man. It was hard to believe that no greater dandy or spender had ever breezed across the country. Croppy had made money once, as fast as he could find safes to open, and Croppy had spent it, until whiskey dulled his technique.

"The point," said Mike, "is a hundred-dollar bill. It's a wall safe."

"Sardine can," Croppy snorted.

"Tonight," said Mike. "The house is empty. I've got a door key."

"Gimme the dough," Croppy sighed. "Where'll I meet you?"

"You get one more drink," Mike said sternly. "And then it's black coffee and a Turkish bath for you. I'll stand for a new outfit of clothes. You look like something out from under a board. I'll be with you every minute."

"Gimme the drink," Croppy groaned.

It was dusk when Susan Kidwell stepped out of a taxi in front of the Turkish bath where Mike was waiting. "I don't know why I should be doing all this for you," said Susan irritably. "Running all over town for you. Trying to find you. Coming here to meet you like I was on your payroll." Susan looked suspicious. "Have you been loafing in a Turkish bath?"

"I have not. What luck did you have?"

"Mediums," said Susan, "don't impress me. I have eleven pipe lines, positively guaranteed, into the spirit world. Three of the mediums started to go into trances in front of me, before I could get away. The fees will be from two dollars to fifty dollars."

"Did you get any information about the Fitzgordan woman?"

"Most of them knew of her," said Susan. "They were all catty. I think the Fitzgordan woman has made more money out of her pitch on Albany Terrace than the others. They're jealous. She gets the carriage trade. Has a husband, and she used to be in St. Louis. I was warned that her spirit controls were not reliable."

Mike did not smile. "I was hoping you'd get a line on that young lady who asked about me last night. Does Mrs. Fitzgordan have a daughter?"

"I asked that time after time. If she has, no one seems aware of it." Susan said, "I telephoned your uncle's office, trying to locate you. He's not at all happy, and he wants to see you. Where is my compact?"

"The police have it," Mike admitted, and before Susan's indignation broke forth, Mike asked, "Do you want to watch a safe burglarized?"

"I do *not!*" Susan refused. "Mike, what insane idea do you have now?"

"It's a honey," Mike said. "And if it doesn't work out, I'm going to feel awfully bad—and Walter Hemphill may get his neck stretched with a hang rope after all. Which will make Uncle Cyrus feel very bad."

"Of course," said Susan sarcastically, "Walter Hemphill will enjoy it. I don't know what to think of you, Mike. You—you worry me."

"I worry Uncle Cyrus too," Mike granted. "But I have a lot of fun. Sure you don't want to tag along?"

"I'm going to soak my feet in a hot bath and go to bed. Ectoplasm," said Susan, "has me down. And that goes for you too, Mike Goodenough. Good-bye."

IT WAS eight o'clock and barely dark when Mike parked half a block from the Elgin Street house. Croppy Bemis was a new man outwardly, well-barbered, nicely dressed, something of the dandy again. Inwardly Croppy was still shaky.

"It's early to go foolin' around a pete," Croppy said uneasily as they walked from the taxicab. "No tellin' who'll see us crashin' the dump."

"Act like you owned the city," Mike advised. "Neighbors won't know but what we're the law. After midnight we'd be suspicious characters."

"Ain't we?" said Croppy.

"No," said Mike. "Not with a door key."

The fat man was not on the steps next door. Mike judged they were unobserved when they walked up the house steps. The new key was not a very good fit. Patience and pressure finally turned the lock. Mike had a flashlight. Deep quiet held the empty interior as they went upstairs.

Croppy squatted in the cedar-lined closet and grunted when he saw the small safe. "Old McCarty job," he said huskily. "Been slicked up to look like new. Gimme that flash."

Croppy put a battered doctor's stethoscope on the floor and produced a thin dog-eared book. "Safe combinations," he muttered. "I paid a hundred for this, an' I've made a hundred grand outa it."

Croppy studied the book, wetting a finger and turning pages. He adjusted the stethoscope in his ears and put the end on the safe front.

"It'll take some time," he warned. "Flop comfortably an' don't bother me."

MIKE watched Croppy working slowly, patiently, with the combination knob, and after a time left the cedar-lined closet and moved quietly about the dark room. He thought of the fat man on the other side of the room wall and smiled. That neighbor's insomnia would get worse if he suspected what was happening so near him.

An automobile horn blew out on the street. It meant nothing, until Mike suddenly realized that the sound had been loud and clear, as if coming through an open window—or a door.

They had closed the front door. All windows should be closed too. Nerves taut, Mike moved on his toes to the bedroom door which had been left ajar.

Croppy had the flashlight. The house seemed quiet, peaceful. "Okay!" Croppy exclaimed in the clothes closet.

Mike stepped out in the hall. The blackness was absolute. Then an even voice said, "Don't move!" The beam of a flashlight struck Mike's eyes, blinding him. He moved his head to one side involuntarily.

Then the top of his head seemed to explode and a hard blow all but numbed his shoulder. Mike glimpsed the hand which had come down through the light with the blow. He grabbed for the arm and lurched forward.

It was a move without conscious thought, driven by surprise, pain, outraged surprise. Groggily Mike was aware that his move when the light struck him had let the blow glance off the side of his head to the shoulder.

He came hard against a strong wiry figure that was struggling to free the arm and knock him away. The light flicked off. The flashlight beat at Mike. They both staggered back.

"Whatsa matter?" Croppy called. He sounded muffled and far away.

Mike's head seemed filled with strange and muted noises. He heard the stranger gasping with effort. Mike got the hand as it wrenched in his grip. He felt a gun. He lurched with the hand, holding desperately, trying to push the gun away.

The roar of a shot blasted beside his ear. But it missed. Mike crowded the man into the wall. He was thrown back, and he slipped. The gun was ripped from his grip. He was falling as the weapon fired again. This time Mike saw the muzzle flash. He was scrambling on the floor, and when he lunged up, the man was not there.

Feet were running. They reached the stairs and went down two steps at a time in heavy, panicky haste. Mike staggered to the darkness.

"Croppy!"

"Whassa matter? Wha' happened? Who got knocked off?" Croppy chattered. "Is it the cops?"

"It will be. Let's get out of here." It was hard to think and speak. "Did you get the safe open?" Mike asked thickly.

"Yeah! Come on! Talk about it later!"

Croppy led the way with the flashlight. The front door was open. Porch lights were on across the street. A man and woman were standing in the open doorway, looking out. Lights went on downstairs in the house where the fat man lived.

"Don't run!" Mike said with an effort. He felt light-headed. He had to concentrate on moving normally.

An automobile was receding in the street. It might have been passing just before they emerged into the open. Around the corner another automobile engine raced into life. The car went away fast, in gear.

Mike got a look at the tail-lights of that second automobile, and saw them turn into the next street. They'd be beyond reach by the time he got to the taxi.

He had to reach out and restrain Croppy Bemis. The little man was at the point of breaking into a run. They reached the taxi. Mike wheeled it around in the street and rolled fast, away from the house.

Then he remembered. He groaned aloud. "My cap! It's back there in the upstairs hall!"

"Oh Lordy!" said Croppy in a near moan. He put the flashlight beam for an instant on Mike's face. "You're bleeding! He shot you in the head!"

Mike explored with fingertips. "Cut my scalp. That wasn't a cop. Two of them were in the house, I think. One at the front door."

"It means the cops, with your hat back there," said Croppy bitterly. "I shoulda had better sense than to let you talk me into a bust like this. I'll get twenty years, with my record."

"I'll never say you were with me, Croppy. My fault, and I'll take the rap. What was in the safe? You said you got it open."

"Nothing in it," said Croppy bitterly. "That's what makes it hard to take. Nothing but a woman's damn vanity case in it."

"Croppy! Where is that vanity?"

"I dunno! Maybe I threw it away when that rod went off. Like to scared me goofy!" Then Croppy said, "I guess I stuck it in my pocket. Here it is."

"Don't," said Mike weakly, "do that to me again. I can take just so much. Open it. What's inside?"

"These gadgets get bigger all the time," said Croppy. "This is a fat one. Cheap one though. Five bucks would buy it anywhere." Croppy held the flashlight. "The works has been took out. Little tin box inside."

"Open it," Mike urged. He was trying to drive fast, dab at blood on the side of his face, look at Croppy's fingers handling the compact, and estimate the disaster that would come when the police found his taxi driver's cap.

Lieutenant Hollister would take one look at that cap and know what to do. Trying to go back and get it would be even worse. One could be certain the police had been notified of gunshots in the house which Madame Stephanie had owned. And men leaving hurriedly.

Croppy fumbled with the little round tin box. He got the lid off. "It's a roll of miniature film!" Croppy exclaimed. "Ain't that a hell of a haul?"

Mike swerved to the curb and parked, motor running. "Give me that film and your flashlight."

Croppy leaned closer and looked too as Mike pulled some of the film over the glowing end of the flashlight. "It ain't pictures. What is it?" Croppy demanded.

"Too fine to read without a magnifier," Mike said. "But Croppy, I think I'm satisfied. Here's your hundred, and where do you want me to take you?"

"Right here," said Croppy. "I'm fading. I'm gonna blow. I don't want none of this." Croppy paused with the door half open. "You said you'd clam up about me?"

"Not a word," Mike promised. "My word as a gentleman, Croppy."

"That's good enough for me," said Croppy. "But I'm still gonna blow town. You ain't been third-degreed yet. I've seen 'em turn gents into bums. Cops ain't nice when they wanna know something." Croppy hurried off without looking back.

It was fifteen minutes to ten when Cyrus Goodenough burst into his handsome suite of offices and found Mike in the conference room arranging chairs.

"What the devil is this?" Uncle Cyrus asked in strangled anger. "Are you trying to ruin me? Make me a disgrace and a laughing stock? What are you doing with those chairs?"

"Getting ready to hold a midnight seance," Mike said, placing another heavy chair against the wall, and stepping back to eye the effect. "We're going to get in touch with the spirits. I got Susan Kidwell to come down. She's gone out to get some ectoplasm and a half-dozen mediums to help out and judge how good I am." Mike chuckled. "Spirits at midnight," he said. "We'll wow 'em."

VII

"STARK, staring, raving mad!" Uncle Cyrus said in a choked voice. "The army should have put you in a psychopathic hospital. Mike, look, I'm your Uncle Cyrus.

Your father's brother. You've been like my own son." Cyrus Goodenough's voice shook. "I—I've loved you, my boy. I still do, and your dear mother. Now please listen to me. Don't do anything further toward trying to ruin me."

"I'm helping you," Mike said cheerfully. "And earning myself five grand. I need it for more taxis, not to speak of furthering the cause of justice."

"Justice?" Uncle Cyrus shouted. He calmed himself with a visible effort. "Michael," he said, "taxicabs were bad enough. Don't do anything more. Just come home quietly with me. I'll do everything I can for you."

"Justice first," said Mike firmly, moving another chair.

Uncle Cyrus strode about the room, waving his arms as if he were addressing a jury.

"Justice! What kind of justice is there in what you're doing to me? You call the jail and use my name to talk to Walter Hemphill. As if it isn't bad enough to have him in there, without bail, all day! You get into some terrible shooting trouble at that house on Elgin Street. Broke into the place, evidently. The police are looking for you. A Lieutenant Hollister telephoned me. He was most serious. There's a general alarm out for you."

"That," said Mike, "is why I'm sticking close inside here. But you needn't worry. I've just talked to Hollister on the telephone." Mike coughed. "I had to suggest I was acting directly as one of counsel for Walter Hemphill."

"My God, I'll never live this down!" Cyrus Goodenough was throwing his arms again. "I came here to the office to get in action to protect you. Hollister must have tried to telephone me again after you called him, and I wasn't there."

"He did say he was going to call you. That's why I wasn't surprised to see you," Mike said. "I warned Hollister things were happening so fast you weren't up on all the details."

"Thirty-four years a member of the Bar—and now *this!*" Cyrus Goodenough said tragically. "What are you doing with that microfilm projector?"

"You use it often enough to throw pages on the screen from your microfilm law library," Mike said reasonably. "I might need it. Can't tell what point of law a spirit will bring up."

"Bah!"

"And since Commissioner Van Kirke and the District Attorney will also be here, I don't want to miss a trick," said Mike. "They promised to come, after I warned them, on your authority, that this was the last chance to avoid your making them all look ridiculous if they forced Walter Hemphill to trial." Mike looked at his wristwatch. "They're probably on their way here now."

Cyrus Goodenough jerked open a wall cabinet and took out a bottle of whiskey. He had the bottle tipped up to his lips when he changed his mind and put the cap back.

"No!" he said thickly. "Getting drunk will only make it worse! Heart stimulant is what I need! Got some pills somewhere." Uncle Cyrus plunged out of the conference room like a man whose legs were wobbly.

Mike looked after his uncle and sighed. "Know just how you feel," he said in sympathy. "Felt that way myself after I was slugged." Mike touched the raw spot in his scalp and winced. The side of his head was swollen, tender. Flashes of pain flickered when he moved too abruptly.

Uncle Cyrus returned to the conference room doorway. "I," he announced hoarsely, "am going to lock myself in the law library. I shall deny all knowledge of this madness." Uncle Cyrus gulped. He looked haggard. "Explanations now would only make it worse. When you've had your way, Michael, and have been locked up for being an irresponsible mental case, I shall do all I can for you. And," added Uncle Cyrus, "for your poor mother."

Uncle Cyrus slammed the door violently.

"Temperish," Mike said regretfully. "But he means well."

THE next hour had its moments of strain and worse. It was probable that only two headline names like Cyrus Goodenough and Walter Hemphill could have drawn Commissioner Van Kirke and the District Attorney to a midnight meeting in the office of the defense attorney on what promised to be a sensational murder trial. That, plus some uncertainty about their evidence, and any jokers Cyrus Goodenough might have ready to reveal at the trial.

Van Kirke was a bundle of energy, a graying and restless man, who kept a strong hand on his department. Hugh Menges, the D.A., was younger, shrewd, something of a politician. Eight months as District Attorney, had started Menges on the way to a reputation that might carry him far.

They came with Lieutenant Hollister, all three of them evidently having discussed the case. Van Kirke snapped. "Where's Cyrus Goodenough?"

"He can't be with you at the moment," Mike said regretfully. "Gentlemen, I thought you might like a drink while you're waiting."

"I should have locked you up earlier in the day," Hollister said shortly. "Young man, I have a warrant in my pocket. You're going to explain what happened in that Elgin Street house this evening. Gunshots were fired. We found the bullet holes upstairs, near your cap."

"That all you found?" Mike asked with interest.

"It's enough."

"I know," Mike agreed. Croppy Bemis must have closed the wall safe and the panel door in front, and Hollister's men had failed to discover the spot. "I had your assurance," Mike reminded, "that Walter Hemphill and his wife would be here. Also a woman who calls herself Dame Serena Fitzgordan, and her husband."

"One of my men is bringing them," said Hollister grimly. "Also the former maid named Annette Nichols, who used to work for Mrs. Hemphill. She was located just before I left the office."

"Perfect," Mike said. "You won't be sorry." A smiling man with a round, chubby face, walked into the room. "Jimmy Phillips, of the Morning *Globe,* will be with us," Mike said. "I guess you all know each other?"

Van Kirke groaned. "I don't like this," he said to Hugh Menges.

"Tut-tut," Phillips said, chuckling. "I don't know what it's all about, boys, but if Van Kirke doesn't like it, I'll bet I will. Don't I get a drink too?" Phillips reminded Mike, "I got a deadline to make. You promised me pictures too."

"No pictures!" Hugh Menges exploded. "I'll leave!"

"No pictures," Mike agreed, winking at Jim Phillips. "You can leave if you want to, Mr. Menges. But I've warned you. Better be present than be sorry."

"Oh, I'll stay, as long as I'm here," Menges said sulkily. "If only to have the last laugh. How long do we have to wait?"

"Not long," Mike promised, looking at his wrist-watch. "Everyone else should be arriving quickly now."

Mrs. Hemphill came, a thin, faded woman who looked ill and tortured. She had been pretty once; she could be again, Mike guessed, if her mind was at rest. Her doctor was with her.

Almost at their heels Walter Hemphill came in custody of a detective. Hemphill was clean-shaven, well-dressed, graying at the temples. He had some of the tortured look that his wife had. They faced each other for a moment, before Hemphill was taken to the other side of the room.

"Well, Peggy, I hope you're satisfied," Hemphill said in a brittle and tired voice.

His wife looked away, wadding a handkerchief in her hand.

Susan came in with five people, four of them women, one a man. Susan looked exhausted, irritable, defiant, sheepish. "All I had time to get," Susan told Mike, nodding at her companions. "I've checked their names on the list."

Mike took the list. "Madam Spalding," he read off. "Mrs. Nadolyn Maxwell. Miss Ruane Capron. Matilda Forsythe. And Dr. Wesley Dean Baxter, Y. M. I."

Dr. Baxter, a tall man with a turkey-like neck and a receding chin, said with dignity, "Yogi Mental Institute has conferred a degree upon me, sir."

"Of course," said Mike. "I want this to be authentic, and as well-known trance mediums, I thought your presence might make this seance authentic and—er—informative. Let's say all five of you are judges."

"I don't know what we are," said Dr. Baxter severely. "We have consented to be present for a modest fee."

"Fifty dollars a head isn't modest," said Mike. "But you'll give tone to the seance."

"The more I see of this, the less I like it," Hugh Menges said to Van Kirke. "Seance!"

A detective brought in a young lady. Her angry pallor, the quick darting of dark eyes around the gathering, made Mike think of

Susan's description. *A pale, delicate, poisonous angel.*

"Annette!" Mrs. Hemphill exclaimed. "What are you doing here? I—I thought you went to New York to work."

"This," said Mike, "must be Miss Annette Nichols, who was Mrs. Hemphill's maid."

"I want a lawyer. I want to know why I'm here," the girl said in nervous anger.

"Just to watch," Mike soothed. "Aren't you the young lady who visited the Taxi Association office last night?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"No one seems to know," Hollister remarked heavily. "I doubt if the young man does."

"And here," said Mike, as the door opened again, "is Dame Serena Fitzgordan, bless her heart. And her husband, I take it."

Two uniformed squad-car men brought them in, the cold, erect, and still black-clad woman, from Albany Terrace, and a not unhandsome, somewhat distinguished man, who looked just short of fifty. Mike regarded the husband with interest, and then said in an aside to Jim Phillips, "Go to the law library at the end of the corridor, and get Cyrus Goodenough. Tell him he'll be sorry if he doesn't show up."

"What gives, pal?"

"Stick around," Mike said. "I've got a fistful of aces."

"Boy, you'd better have," whispered Phillips, who had been a keen and interested observer of every word and move since he arrived. Jim Phillips was the top crime reporter of the city.

Dame Serena Fitzgordan said in a colorless and cold voice, "Someone is going to be sued for false arrest and defamation."

"Sit down," Mike said, "and watch this seance. It's going to be a beaut. Susan," Mike continued, turning, "you sit at the head of the table—and give."

"I feel like a goony," Susan whispered. "Is all this necessary?"

"Mind your ectoplasm," Mike whispered back.

Susan seated herself at the head of the table. Mike stepped to the light switch and plunged the room into darkness. The last thing he saw was the flushed and angry face of Uncle Cyrus coming through the doorway.

VIII

"CLOSE the door," Mike said. He was back beside Susan. He was crisp now, not at all humorous. "All of you," he went on, "are wondering why you are here. I'm going to show you. Miss Kidwell, can you feel anything?"

"I can feel *something,*" Susan answered with husky restraint as Mike pinched her.

"If I seem cruel, I do it to be kindly," Mike said to the listeners. "Miss Kidwell is going to bring you messages from Dorothy Hemphill."

"I won't stand for this!" Walter Hemphill cried out. "I wasn't told that this would be done!"

"You'll do well to listen," Mike said. "For your wife's sake, if not your own. Mrs. Hemphill is here to judge the truth of what she hears." And Mike said, "Susan, are you in a trance?"

Susan's voice answered in a high-pitched tone. "I can't find Colette's red ballroom dress. Someone threw it away."

Everyone in the room heard the low gasp. It was Mrs. Hemphill, and her voice was stifled. "Dorothy was eleven when that doll's dress was lost!"

"It hurts," Susan said plaintively. "It's in my little toe. I'm not going barefooted any more. I don't like camping."

"Muskogan Lake!" Walter Hemphill's voice said thickly. "It *was* in her little toe. I remember taking the splinter out. I—I don't understand this."

"But, mummy dear," Susan's thin voice said, "I want to look pretty like you. Pretty red lips. I didn't take anything else out of your drawer."

The sobbing cry that came from Walter Hemphill's wife made even Mike swallow hard in the darkness.

"No one," she cried, "*no one* but Dorothy and myself could know about *that!* Oh, it *is* Dorothy. She was twelve and had used my lipstick and powder and rouge. We were alone in the house when I caught her and made her wash it off. I remember so clearly. Dorothy, you *are* here, aren't you? Here with mother again!"

"Evidential that cannot be denied!" the sonorous voice of Dr. Wesley Dean Baxter called out.

"Anyone care to dispute the fact that no

living person but Mrs. Hemphill can know what you have just heard?" Mike asked in the darkness.

Hugh Menges spoke sharply. "Mrs. Hemphill, are you certain, can you swear, that not even your husband knew of this?"

"My husband was away on a business trip. I never mentioned it."

"This woman who was your maid?"

"Dorothy was dead years before I employed Annette. It happened years before I knew Annette existed. How can you *doubt* this? It—it's just like it was with Madame Stephanie. Madame was so wonderful in what she brought me. My darling little girl was there in the room with me again time after time."

"With us always," said Dr. Baxter. "Only with the proper control, the right medium."

"I don't understand it," Menges muttered audibly.

"I do," said Mike calmly. "I have the greatest sympathy for Mrs. Hemphill and others like her who have suffered loss, and hope desperately to reach beyond the grave. There are thousands now who would give their last dollar to be as sure as Mrs. Hemphill that they are communicating with someone who has gone on. And I," said Mike coldly, "have only the deepest revulsion for anyone so callous as to profit from that hope, through trickery. Take a look at the microfilm screen on the wall."

Mike flicked a switch. Light glowed in a small projector. There was a general shuffling and change of position as a page of large, round, childish writing leaped out on the screen.

"A page," said Mike, "from Dorothy Hemphill's diary. The diary was removed from the locked case where Mrs. Hemphill kept it. Every page was photographed on microfilm. The diary was returned and Mrs. Hemphill never suspected. It was as simple as that. The Davis Recording Company, in the person of Albert Davis, the owner, assured me over the telephone this evening, that they have the account of Mrs. Herbert Love, who often brought things in to be microfilmed, and who now and then had a pet monkey with her." Mike took a breath. "Guess," he said, "who had a chance to swipe the diary and peddle the contents to Madame Stephanie? Would it be Mrs. Hemphill's former maid?"

THE girl's denial was wildly violent. "You can't accuse me!"

Mike turned on the room lights. The maid, Annette, was on her feet, a detective's hand holding her arm. Susan was looking at Mrs. Hemphill. That thin and faded woman was on her feet also. She was looking across the room at her husband.

"Walter," she faltered, "when I heard a radio news report that a woman had been found dead, with a pet monkey beside her, just around the corner from Madame's house, I lost my head. I—"

Walter Hemphill walked to her, and took her in his arms, and did not say anything as he held her, stroking her hair.

Mike drew a slow breath. Uncle Cyrus was looking at him uncertainly, hopefully.

Jim Phillips asked sharply, "Who killed the Stephanie woman?"

"I'll tell you, and Mr. Menges can decide about my proof," Mike said. Now even the D.A. was leaning forward intently.

"Madame Stephanie was a clever woman," Mike said. "She even had a snake for the gullible to gape at before her seances, and she had facts which convinced certain people they were hearing authentic messages from the other side. Dorothy Hemphill's diary wasn't the only personal papers of others that Madame had microfilmed. She paid Annette two hundred dollars for getting the diary. They worked together. Annette would get a job as a maid, get needed facts and papers, and move on to another prospective sucker. Which was what they all were. Annette got greedy. She wanted half the profit. She didn't get it. Exposure would kill the graft. So Annette went to a competitor of Madame's. She lost her head in the final quarrel they had and warned Madame Stephanie what she was going to do. It was a case of swindlers falling out, and no one wanting publicity. Madame Stephanie got three telephone warnings to get out of town. The last warning said she'd not have another chance. She noticed once that her car was being trailed. Someone went through her apartment.

"That convinced her the chips were down. She had title to the Elgin Street house by then and didn't mean to leave. She moved to Malcome Street secretly. Mr. Hemphill came there last night and warned her he was going to do something about his wife. I

don't think that frightened her much. Madame had too much of a hold on Mrs. Hemphill. But something else did frighten her. She became convinced she wasn't safe at the Malcome Street address. She called a taxi and started to her husband's house. I was driving her. My taxi was followed. When I told her an automobile was trailing us, she became agitated and ordered me to drive quickly to the Elgin Street house. I left her there. She went in the house, and she went out the back door, evidently to go through the alley and see who might be in front of her house, or to keep going somewhere else. She met someone, and she was killed. Her purse was searched, her keys taken.

"Perhaps a quick entry into the house was made and her bags searched. No luck. Something was missing. It might have been lost in my taxicab. Last night this maid, Annette, came to the Association garage and wanted to know what taxi had carried Madame Stephanie. Early the next morning, a woman came to the garage and said she had lost a vanity in my cab. She gave a false name and was foolish enough to give her right telephone number. I suppose she thought a casual woman passenger and a lost beauty aid weren't proof of anything. And they wouldn't have been," said Mike, "if she hadn't been a well-known medium. I called on her with a borrowed compact, and she made an excuse to take the compact into the house and look into it. Miss Kidwell was already in the house. Miss Kidwell must have been viewed from hiding by this girl, Annette, and recognized. At any rate Miss Kidwell and I were frozen out. But," said Mike, "we were making progress in the defense of Walter Hemphill. I knew that Madame Stephanie must have lost a compact before she was killed last night, and the compact was important, and I knew who wanted it. So, by inference, I knew who must have followed my taxi last night, and killed Madame Stephanie. But the missing fact was that compact."

Lieutenant Hollister said, "We haven't heard from the F.B.I. on those fingerprints."

"Doesn't matter," Mike said. "The only reason I could think of for Madame Stephanie changing her mind and going to that empty house was to hide the missing compact." Mike smiled at Hollister. "I went in the house this afternoon, and located a newly installed wall safe upstairs. Tonight I—er, opened the safe. The compact was inside. Madame Stephanie thought it so valuable she got it behind a steel door as quickly as possible, when she thought she was in danger. That was why she went to the Elgin Street house."

"But that shooting?" Hollister demanded.

"Someone else evidently wanted to search the house for the compact," Mike said. "We collided. A man tried to kill me. I expect you can match the bullets he fired with a gun you should find around his house. You've got him there with his wife, who calls herself Dame Serena, and who claimed she lost a compact in my taxi last night."

Hugh Menges was on his feet. "What was in the compact? That microfilm?"

"Naturally," said Mike. "It was the most valuable thing Madame Stephanie had."

Dame Serena Fitzgordan stood up with cold dignity. "I want a lawyer," she announced. "I have listened to nonsense patiently." She was pale. Her lips were tight.

"You'll find a list of lawyers in the outer office," Mike told her. "And Mr. Menges, the District Attorney, will find his case against you and your friend Annette on the microfilm. Madame Stephanie put down her dealings with Annette, and Annette's threat to go to you, and the fact that she recognized your threatening voice over the telephone. I don't know why Madame Stephanie's husband was killed, unless it was fear he had been told enough to make him dangerous after his wife was killed."

"The same gun killed the husband that killed the wife," said Hollister briskly. "We make one case and we've made the other."

"Hold it!" Phillips called. "Pictures!"

Phillips had let a cameraman into the room. Even Van Kirke edged a little to get full into the newspaper picture. And when the flashbulb winked Uncle Cyrus said expansively, "Well, gentlemen?"

"You win," Hugh Menges admitted.

"What about my compact?" Susan whispered, tugging at Mike's sleeve.

"You get a new solid gold one, Gorgeous," Mike said, "as soon as I collect from Uncle. Stick around and listen to him scream while he pays."

WIND

By B. E. COOK

A RUNNING FIGHT which cost thousands of navy personnel and downed three hundred enemy planes certainly didn't let off the merchant vessels unscathed. He lost the S.S. Pankhurst *because something devastating blew her inside out. He himself was shot into the air rocket fashion. Only the fact he could both swim and dive brought him up to the surface where he clung to flotsam. He escaped bullets by submerging beneath it. Eventually he reached, not Luzon but the Asiatic mainland and in a deplorable condition. Being of the merchant service, he wandered perforce, always in search of a way back into circulation again.*

WE ENTERTAINED no illusions about our skipper. Or his condition. To us he was the up-front, the stuffed shirt, foxy at time-checking and dependent on his mate. Not until we became sidetracked by the suddenness of the war's ending, however, did we discover his meanness. Once in confidence the Third had remarked to me, "The impressions on a coin don't make the value in its metal, you know. That's Gavin."

When we took to poker at anchor, I got the full import of the Third's quip. Orders were to sweat it out here because the Japs had left some tin ore. We're not built to stand the pounding of that stuff down onto the tank tops, but nobody consulted us. Days on end we waited. Orders changed in favor of a part cargo of rice for—of all places!—Boston, our home port. Fine indeed, but we continued to wait in the perishing heat.

Meantime, poker in the officers' mess. Merely the penny-ante variety to kill time, forestall griping and forget the heat, but it did more. It proved the old saw about playing cards to get at the real character of a body. Cap'n Gavin played his shifty-eyed with furrowed features. The hazard of relinquishing anything, even pennies, was running a temperature that raised purple lines up both his temples.

The dead giveaway came when he'd made a few coins. He stacked them close to his vest. Both those immense hands fenced out round them as though to ward off our acquisitive gaze. As the game progressed, he hunched, clipped his responses and ante-ed only when reminded. He was the meanest man we'd ever run afoul of and not a few of us said so.

As though this weren't enough to turn all stomachs, the nagging engineers on the *Palowan* were endowed with those idiosyncrasies usually attributed to the after guard in a poker game with the deck persuasion. They ran a steady line of side talk, they razzed if we were winning. It was inevitable, then, that they'd focus on Gavin's greed for their pennies; they liked the way his hands hugged his makings.

It eventually reached the stage where Gavin clean forgot that after all he was the top-ranking person aboard, the position clothed in the most dignity. In one of his blasting comebacks he advised the Chief—all hands, for that matter—that the Chief would have more of this world's goods were he to take a lesson from what, instead, he chose to belittle. That roused a chorus from the engineers which we, the mates, would have but could not advisedly join.

The cheapest spectacle came on a particularly torrid mid-afternoon. The heat was awful and somehow the game itself gave way to this verbal contest. It did look as though Gavin, having gathered in a succession of sizeable jackpots, was foxily easing away the game in talk in order to keep it all. Anyway, heckling and his loss of dignity and respect stung him into roaring that he could buy and sell all hands; he, if they pleased—or didn't—had property ashore!

A cynical, united guffaw greeted that disgusting exhibition. Oh, he was drunker than ever, that afternoon. Perhaps the rest of us had in a bit too much of that native slops with the double kick too; but he could com-

"Paper-work Skipper!" Was the Taunt; but the Sea Proves All Things

mand the most, being skipper and trading on his prerogatives. Flushed and glorying in the united attention his personal disclosure won for him, he elaborated in detail. It was cheap and intimate and belittling—I said he was drunk. He was high!

Bah! I went ashore despite the heat. An officious Arab in a fez brushed past me importantly, probably to his menial job as doorman. I moved along slowly in oppressive heat to the river. In the shade of a mud hut I viewed the palms rising stock still from the rice fields and pondered my skipper. For we'd be sailing halfway round the world under that bloated, stuffed-shirt sot and I'd have to do the navigating for him.

ALL too soon, the heat drove me back into the city. I noted the few effects of the war as natives wound in purple to their hips crept by, their faces deadpan and sullen. I dodged into one's yoke to ask the way to a drink. An Arab butted in, beamed on me appraisingly and displayed rings and bracelets, launching the usual, glib, swift sales talk. I focused, however, on a blob of saffron coming ashimmer in the sun; that would be a Buddhist, very like a monk.

I braced to dodge his big umbrella. The

Arab gabbled louder, but the monk closed in and begged brazenly until the Arab's eyes flecked fire. To cut the issue I yelled, "Drink!" The Arab guffawed, the umbrella went on. The Arab stowed his wares and indicated a drinking spot.

I tipped him and entered. It was cooler there, but I smelled rice wine. "Damn that rotgut!" I murmured while my eyes grew used to the umbrageous interior, tables and the inevitable blue at windows. "No," said I, "not for me." I faced the hot street again.

Before I could step outside, that Arab's wares clinked sharply and he was pointing over my shoulder into the room. "Another ah, griffin," he said in taunting sarcasm. "He say wait, praise Allah." Then I was looking into the brown eyes, hungry for sight of this American, for an easterner, a downeast Yankee. He swept beads off his face unbelievably to ask huskily, "You're a seaman? A downeast seaman here?"

"Right, stranger; so are you. I'm Second on that thing blistering her paint in this hellish heat."

"A ship? American? I couldn't have missed—"

"The *Palowan,* Blue Flag freighter, Cap'n Linus Gavin. We're hung up for a part cargo of rice, but the damned delays—what's the matter?"

"Take me aboard, mister," he demanded, controlling his voice.

I wanted no hullabaloo in the fo'castle, giving the skipper something to harp on and curse me all the way home. "What's your rating, mister?"

He forced a quick smile through floodtide emotions. "I'll speak your cap'n," said he while I measured the ravages of heat in his lean body. But neither heat nor obvious privation had quite drained away all the indefinable marks of authority in the man.

FROM outside, the mess room seemed quiet. My stranger himself pushed in the screen door and stepped over the weatherboard. Over his shoulder I looked at Gavin, sprawled at the head of the table, his piles of pennies overturned, his arms hanging slack. Not, however, so slack as his gawping mouth. Bleary eyes, glazed by liquor, stared unbelievingly. He reminded me of a bosun aboard a certain tanker up Sabine Pass, one trip, when he discovered a goat ogling him from on top his shins at the food of his bed.

"In the name of God!" escaped from the stranger in front of me. "Broke his word. At it again." For a few seconds, only his quick breathing punctuated the tension. Finally the skipper's flabby mouth framed one word: "Grant!" But he tried, you could see, to believe it was a ghost, a nightmare or an illusion induced by the combined forces of excess drinking, heat and quarrelling. "You . . . Grant Gavin out here?"

So-o-o. His own brother? If so, what a brotherly meeting!

We half walked, half carried the dazed hulk for'd to his cabin bed. Before I could leave them to the privacy due such a meeting on the back of earth, the skipper found his voice and temper. "How the hell did you come back to life? What do you expect aboard my ship, you of all people, b'gawd?"

Unruffled, his brother replied, "I survived the big party up the China Sea and got lost in the rush of events—till now. As for expecting, Linus, I shall sail with you."

A cruel grin formed on the large, slack features as the skipper gave it his cluttered thought. "Will, hey? Will. Okay, we'll see about that."

Grant sank onto the settee and asked, "Any word from home?"

"Why?" came in a challenge. "What's it to you? Word—home. Hah?"

His brother rose, saying gently, "You wouldn't understand, not in your condition. Where is your spare room aboard this one?"

The poise, the accusation became too much for Linus's temper, especially after those raucous taunts in the mess room. "Spare room hell," he exploded, "where is your own ship? What have you done to the *Pankhurst,* you paper-work skipper?"

Grant did not answer promptly. He gazed through the screened porthole, seeing again, I presumed, the violence of that terrible attack, the lost men . . . "Never mind," he said evenly, "never mind. I go home in this one. I'll explain to you later on."

The skipper tightened all over to cry thickly, "If I say so."

Grant faced him composedly. "No. My orders were: if the worst happens, return to Boston the best and quickest way possible. At long last, thank God, I find one of our

own ships; I shall obey my orders." He caught his brother's eyes and held them a long moment to add, "Therefore they become your orders, don't they now?"

I was directed to show him aft to the spare room on the port side. On the way he murmured something about "Awful shame . . . *Palowan* . . . miracle."

MR. PURCELL had known for months that somewhere an operating table had his number. Only a natural, seaman's suspicion of surgeons and the wartime excuse that mates were scarce had kept him and the table apart—as far as possible. Certainly Cap'n Gavin couldn't have run the *Palowan* without him; no substitute mate would have taken the gaff from Gavin nor carried so much of his responsibility. We all knew that Mr. Purcell was master of the ship in all but name and salary; had been so for several trips.

About three hours east of the international date line I myself announced change of days, just in passing, and Mr. Purcell had an attack. It folded him double on the bridge in a nasty rain squall. We got him to bed and notified the skipper.

Again he exploded. The overall burden of his theme seemed to be: What'll I do without him? He has no right to take sick in mid-ocean. My own theme was: Do I go up to acting First without First's papers to catch hell until maybe I tell off the Old Man the way Purcell should have long ago? It could ruin my chances for the credentials necessary for trying the examination.

"You!" the skipper shouted me out of my thoughts. "F'r gawdsakes how many times do I have to yell at you before—What's the matter with your ears? They look big enough f'r mizzen royals." Then, in reeking sarcasm, "Go invite my—my guest for'd here."

Where had he come upon that breath? Real West Indie rum away out here after months in the Far East? The foxy miser!

Mr. Grant Gavin followed no lower rating anywhere; he led the way. How could two men so different be brothers? What slug of new tactlessness awaited this, their second formal meeting?

"We're halfway across," the skipper thundered at him. "What are you nowadays, a hermit?"

It was then we observed that Linus was the older; and evidently he'd grown up bullying—or bulldozing—Grant who stood shorter with the peculiar dignity some smaller men have.

"What's wanted of me, cap'n?" As reserved about it as when I'd discovered him. He got a blast of Linus's breath, looked him over carefully and added, "Let's go into the chartroom." He led the way before the skipper's dazed wits could invent an objection.

WHEN, at length, they emerged, Cap'n Grant Gavin was actually signed on as First for the rest of the trip to Boston. No, we did not have two skippers; the Gavins never had stood equal in each other's estimation and never would. "Now," the Old Man shouted for all to note, "have Mr. Purcell moved aft there and you move for'd."

G. G. did not move Purcell; he was too sick. But that incident demonstrated the Old Man's utter lack of appreciation for Purcell; also it exhibited the least brotherly love I ever witnessed. Big Linus, having the upper hand, had promptly put his brother into second place before us all, the erstwhile master who had lost his ship. He even chuckled over the trick.

Nor did matters improve. Quite to the contrary because the skipper could not guzzle so freely with another Blue Flag Line skipper at his elbow. Thus deprived, he waxed uglier, too tight headed to think straight. He resented us all. The new First, however, performed in silence, treating the situation as temporary. Even Purcell would have admired him.

After a few days of maneuvering, he induced the skipper to give him access to the *Palowan's* papers. It was done as though he had long ago perfected his technique for squeezing concessions from his older brother.

"Papers!" the skipper gruffed. "Same old habit, paper-work skipper, mulling over certificates and manifests and invoices and stores lists—" But the mate got them, noted the barometer for the third or fourth time I'd tallied.

What, thought I, would be the connection between those papers and the aneroid? I soon discovered.

The wind rose from four to seven in two watches. The glass kicked downward. Although we knew that the likelihood of gales hereabouts stood at one in a hundred or less, this was the one. The Pacific was about to belie its name—at our expense.

In my Afternoon Watch we had a thirty-five knot breeze with some whitecaps. Soon came high seas pounding on her quarter, and a skipper leaning heavily to the rail outside, his eyes haunted, his stomach in a knot and his great hulk unsteady. For within him, too, raged a storm and it required no aneroid to appraise us. Grant Gavin would have his hands full.

I still believe it was well that he'd gone down on deck to check the anchors and snug down while Cap'n Gavin radiated a rage and mental turmoil which must explode. Experience had taught me to ignore his moods long enough to get out of his bleary vision, but soon he stood blinking my way.

And thus discovered his brother emerging from that small, round hatch between the first and second coamings. "Hi, for'd!" he bawled out, swaying in the wind to the ship's motion. "Wha— wa— what's a-matter b'low there? Mate!" he howled so violently it rocked him. "You. Four times you've gone b'low there. Come up here, mister."

While he gnashed up a tirade, G. G. took men onto the after house to lash down ladders and secure a line box. He came, then, in the manner of one who deals with what the hospitals call "an agitated case." Arriving, he occupied himself with trifles while saying perfunctorily, "What's wanted, Cap'n?"

The Old Man didn't faze; inside five minutes he developed an argument. "Sulfuric acid, fifteen carboys, cased, stowed in boxed-in coal in the for'd hold!" He repeated that as though to hammer it into the mate, but in truth to imprint the fact on his own brain. What he couldn't admit was that he hadn't even known the stuff was aboard; he'd neglected to read carefully the ship's papers or heed Mr. Purcell's report on this hated item. No ship welcomes a consignment of acid.

When at length G. G. did confront him, his brown eyes couldn't quite hide his disgust and shame over the condition of this, a fellow skipper under the Blue Flag and his own brother. Crisply he repeated, "Your mate has stowed fifteen carboys of acid in soft coal, port side in number one, and done a good job with it. The glass is falling for a big wind so I'm watching it. Now what were you saying, Cap'n?"

"Saying? Fetch it on deck. Acid b'low—in rice cargo! Up with—" Spray flew in his face and the wind swayed him from the rail.

"Wait, skipper. I can't raise carboys through that booby hatch and we'd wet the rice now if we opened number one. It's too late for that."

Cap'n Gavin cursed him, then went down the inside stairway.

I figured. My last sight indicated we should see Cape Mala for the landfall the Old Man had demanded. "In eleven hours or better," I started to tell G. G. Before he could voice his objections, the skipper came up in working clothes and big leather gloves and roared, "Second, get me bose and six men quick. First, you phone the Chief to open her up till we get that fix off Mala."

"Mala," G. G. shouted. "A lee shore? We're going to want room."

The skipper belched a whiff of fresh alky in my face and roared, "I ordered you aft to get me—"

I RAN the main deck in the twilight, convinced that I hadn't been so smart to bring Cap'n G. G. aboard us.

Weather came on faster than the men came for'd. A sea broke over the starb'd rail and it should have stayed the Old Man, but he drove the six regardless. The cover came off number one about twenty degrees, four hands scurried below and he roared at them against the wind as water swirled over his feet. He was really going to fetch out the carboys.

"Stand by here," G. G. ordered me and disappeared to reappear at his brother's side. Whatever he said failed. "Get back on watch, you—you mate," came up on the wind.

G. G. obeyed him but he ordered me down there to look after the skipper. "He's in no shape for that job," he confided.

The cap'n saw me first, though. "Get the hell— I'm doing this," he bawled, swinging one long arm in a gesture which

emphasized not only his order but his mental condition. It rocked him to his heels.

About dark, the fifteenth carboy came up on a line over the coaming. The hatch was closed and battened quickly, the carboys lined along the lee bulwarks, presumably to be lashed there between frames. From the bridge I could just make out that the cap'n's footing got less steady as the work progressed. G. G.'s eyes seemed to be glued on the scene, registering deep concern. "Drunk," he scolded in the wind, "damned shame—disgrace to us."

Suddenly the *Palowan's* bow dropped into one of those extra deep hollows and she lay over to starb'd sliding into it. Carboys got away from the men and raced across the deck.

Some fetched up against the coamings, others smashed against the deck winch. Men yelled and the Old Man's voice broke off as his feet shot from under him amid the crackling noises of wood and glass.

"Cargo lamp, quick!" G. G. threw at me.

A sea tumbled aboard, drenched them all and reacted with the hissing acid while breakage slewed back over the deck. Acid fumes cut my wind when I lurched in under the fo'castle head for the extension light, plugged in and led it outside. It revealed men heaving breakage overside with bare hands while bose with three men tried to secure the carboys still whole. They looked foolish.

But the Old Man struggled on the reeling deck to get up. Acid itched his face, ate at already blackened areas of his clothes and choked him. Blood blackened with reacting sea water and acid ran down one cheek as he got to one knee, completely undone by so many mishaps at once.

I tried to help him up. Others came weaving our way. He coughed and wheezed, another sea foamed up the side and slammed onto us; he retched in a convulsive motion that tore him from our grasp and rolled him toward the bridge—

The mate was among us. To me he snapped, "Topside."

It isn't often that two of a ship's officers for'd are out of the picture. Our mate Purcell had a bad case of gallstones, now our skipper was borne to his bed with acid burns, several deep gashes from broken glass and at least one artery spouting blood.

THUS did Grant Gavin become acting cap'n of the *Palowan* in the teeth of a gale. Did he know her well enough to pull her through it? What experience had he with Pacific weather? With a nine-thousand ton stem winder? Only time could ease my misgivings.

But our Third evidently had none; his hatred of the skipper overruled the storm. "Wind?" he said in my ear sarcastically. He pointed toward the skipper's cabin and finished it with: "Down there's the big wind, blast 'im."

High over the boisterous sea, on top of the wheelhouse, braced against the standard compass, I caught a faint spot of light in the night. Through the binoculars I'd picked up Cape Mala away in the distance. The Chief certainly had driven the *Palowan*. Any second, navigating officer glories in a landfall after weeks of navigation, but this time I returned below in deep concern. The skipper had ordered this procedure when he lacked foresight and circumspection; now we could see a lee shore, the storm was definitely worsening and we had a stranger for skipper.

"Sorry, sir," I concluded in reporting it while G. G. already had us on a southerly course.

"You had your orders," he shouted in the mounting noise of the wind. As an afterthought he said, "Been off that shore for hours, damn it."

I could not turn in with a stranger in command and the glass jerking downward three, five, then eight points in successive hours. By two a.m. nobody could doubt we'd run into a gale. All that night it grew more strident, the seas larger. G. G. set his taut-skinned head and braced for the test of his life. He'd cock his ears to her vibrations, go outside and pull himself along the bridge rail to see by the foam's whiteness how much sea she hove aside, how much piled on deck. He'd hang on amidships to watch her bow, I suppose, for tendency to root.

Aye, he had a ship built for Atlantic weather and she weighed on his mind. Could she weather in part cargo what the barometer promised or would the gale outmatch her power to climb? Whether these were the factors in his mind, they had mine on the rack, for ever since a touch-and-go

experience in boyhood in high, breaking seas, the height of them was my greatest concern and I gauged them by how well I could see over them coming at us.

By seven a.m. we'd made some headway; we were off that lee shore. Now the weather hauled a bit into the east of south and we followed it. By eleven hours we headed S. E. and had trouble holding her into it. I could barely see beyond some of those crests when G. G. took the helm a few minutes to get the feel of things for himself. Then "Meet it two points for'd of beam; she ought to ride easier in this part cargo," he told the Third.

But she rode so high that the wind swung her too far despite the helm. She rolled a beaut that buried her decks until only her three islands showed above acres of foam. The Third took over and fought her back onto the new course and even then had trouble keeping her out of the trough. Had the wind already outmatched her power? And Grant Gavin?

He must have recognized that threat, but he kept it to himself. He found occasions between seas to keep a check on our faces; he was one skipper who recognized at least the human factor and I began to sense power in the man which belied his frail body and drawn features.

When, phoning the engine room to check on ballast, he spoke in steady, unruffled, deliberate tones, I began to realize that the skipper's folly with those carboys had perhaps been a blessing in disguise. It had removed him from a situation out of which only consummate skill, deliberation and this steadiness could extricate hip and men. We were caught in a hurricane.

By noon the wind screeched, rain swept us with the noise of a million spikes, and immense, dark walls often appeared too much for the *Palowan's* power to climb against wind. So many of them thundered onto her that G. G. froze at his window, statuesque, feeling her strength to withstand their cannonade on her long main deck.

He ordered all who could steer to come for'd into the lower bridge on their first, half reasonable chance between blows. So the bosun soon huddled them abreast the bunker hatch. When swirling waters over the deck settled enough to bare the catwalk, they ran for the lower bridge entrance over it in driving rain and spray. But those behind seemed to think those ahead should move on faster. They crowded on the slippery footing and one went down.

"Good God, no!" G. G. cried as the sailor slid off the catwalk. Abruptly he flew from the window in the after end of the wheelhouse and leaped down the stairway.

Immediately I saw him on deck, running. He snatched up that fellow, swung him back onto the catwalk and himself scrambled up behind him. The sailor did make it to the bridge, but G. G. was a split second late. A terrible wall of water swept over him. Gone! Cap'n Grant Gavin for one sailor and I couldn't leave the bridge myself nor did the others down there seem to realize his fate.

THE great whirlpool rushed to the scuppers and rail when she rolled to port—he was not in it, not heads up anyway. Then I discovered his body wound round a stanchion under the cable which served for a lifeline or rail. His clothing was plastered to his bones and the rain bounced off him and away on the wind. Was he dead?

He unwound himself, crawled for'd, finally got his feet under him and reeled on. He got inside the lower bridge none too soon for another sea really did bury the whole deck close behind him. It poured onto the quarterdeck. It boomed onto the after house and sizzled round the funnel. One life-raft snapped its hold and went over the far side in that sea, our first loss.

"Phewee!" I shouted above the storm's noises when he came up dripping. He couldn't have heard it, for there in the careening wheelhouse he changed to dry, borrowed clothes, oblivious to me and the Third standing by. Such heroism has drawn medals many a time, it is true, but that was farthest from his mind. His eyes and ears, his very feet were concentrated on the ship again. For G. G., within the limits of mere hours, was doing what usually requires months, often years. He was fast becoming a part of the *Palowan*, her brain.

And well that he did for, believe it or not, those seas came higher than her topmast, by fifteen hours. I lost a lot of breaths that afternoon watching her down into deep abysses with crests breaking aloft,

and marvelling every time her engine succeeded in shoving her up the awful sides.

But not without a price. We'd arrived at a stage where the constant intensifying battle was taking its toll. Despite our supreme efforts to hold her quarter on, there were times when we climbed at a dangerous and damaging angle. One boarding sea buried her aft end until only the top of the high bunker hatch and the funnel stuck out. When she emerged from its tons of burden, she shivered the worst I'd ever seen her and her portside boat was emptied, swinging crazily, bent like a carton and gleaming in the rain.

WE LOST those ladders; when, nobody knows. Only the lines box containing the gun remained there aft—a strange unexplainable fact. Then bosun on the engine room phone reported that hammering seas had sprung the portside door at the for'd end of the passageway. Water raced past rooms, slopped into the engine room before all doors could be dogged tight. The heat below became stifling.

G. G. came from the phone saying, "So water's going down their ventilators too, they complain. Lucky if they don't lose the ventilators. Then, mister!" On second thought he returned to the phone, ordering bose himself to play carpenter to that sprung door—"and stand by to plug ventilator holes."

Later I noticed him clinging to the post at the stairhead. "Second," said he, "I can't leave. Go look in on Mr. Purcell, poor devil, and the cap'n. If you can scare up grub anywhere for'd, for gawdsake feed them. And look for inflammation that throbs, see, and any signs of fever."

Mr. Purcell's face was the map of torture. He suffered. I believe he had passed out at times. Of course, he showed no wounds to throb nor had he the bright eyes or complexion of fever. I fed him dry bread but he couldn't eat.

The skipper was a sight. Pitching headfirst into his cabin on a particularly bad roll to starboard, I fetched up against the head of his bed.

"You blasted lubber," he roared, "you'll never make a seaman."

"Nor will any of us if this keeps on getting worse, sir," I panted.

"How's the glass now?" he cried through swollen cheeks and lips.

"Low in the twenties and still falling," while I hunted for food. In the chest of drawers under his bed I located, among other things canned soup. "Soup, sir?" I asked, eyeing him for signs of infection on that acid-scorched face.

"Cold? To hell with it. Mix me a drink; sugar in that tin box. God, what a gale, gimme a drink."

He looked haggard and desperate for the stuff when I tried his pulse and made a pass at examining burns and glass cuts all over him. His patience lasted short and he yelled, "Who the hell do you think you are, a nurse? I'm master of this ship and I order you to mix me a—"

G. G., hearing my report, shouted above the noise, "Too bad about Purcell. The cap'n'll manage, though. So long as he can curse you for a drink and refuse soups, he'll make out. I hope to God this drains the liquor clean out of his system if we—" He turned away solemnly, nor need he finish it. We had arrived at a state wherein even he had to admit some doubt of survival.

I stood there swaying to her breath-taking rolls, rocking on my toes with her dizzy climbs, my eyes fixed on the man. The heat of Indo-China had shorn him of every vestige of reserve flesh. His emaciated frame must have been fashioned in iron or hardened copper, the way it had saved the sailor off the catwalk. It must be charged full of electric energy to hold up today. But the weather showed no indication of improving, the glass persisted downward and he alone stood between us and disaster. What would become of ship and men if he broke under the strain?

My heart filled my throat at the prospect; it would be up to me. Oh I'd realized it all along but on this late afternoon with the worst yet ahead of us and night impending. I sank to the settee and tried to swallow. I went into the chartroom to face it out because, believe me, he did look different since I had reported Purcell's and the skipper's conditions.

Had he hoped for respite from one or both of them? And, not getting it, did the burden on his lone shoulders account for his driven, thinner, grimmer look? Then he was past his peak, the Indo-China heat

hadn't left enough of him and I would assume the blind, dangerous work of keeping her head into the weather. Neither of us had slept since all this started; I lighted a smoke to steady my nerves. Forty-three souls, boats that couldn't be launched, one item after another being stripped from her, two sick officers and no doubt more aft, all hands worn ragged in body and brain—and only myself, a Second, a navigating officer, to replace a beaten G. G.

Suddenly I looked up and there he stood, his brown eyes reading my very thoughts. "Take over," he said above the boom of a sea coming aboard.

I wove my way into the wheelhouse, eyes fixed on the next sea coming. I clung to my window-sill as her battered fo'castle head started to swing alee. The helm clupped to right—that held her and she rose without rooting too badly. Up that foam-streaked mountain she labored but rolled away from it on the rise. Green water cockled high over the rail and poured in. Soon she rode high into the rain on top of a world in spindrift that hid it. She kept rolling up there, started the long way into the valley where darkness reminded me night was almost upon us. The white on the seas only postponed it.

I saw her to the bottom of another dive and up; the next wouldn't knot my damned stomach quite so tight—and directly behind me a voice said, "One ventilator's gone and I made out two funnel guys waving."

Which turned me around and he read my reaction in my eyes, I suppose, for he said, "Now see here, Second, ladders and guys are nothing; they might even steam her without a stack if it came to that. The four important factors are: weather, wheel, tail shaft and engine. Fix them in mind, they're your essentials."

Sparks pulled himself up the stair well, bilious, big-eyed and weary.

"You look hungry," G. G. shouted at him in the spoofing manner characteristic of masters addressing their human loans from the radio companies.

Sparks pantomimed heaving. His lips said, "Only sick."

"And scared," G. G. added for him. "Any weather reports?"

There were none. G. G.'s gaunt face resumed its solemnity. "Go rest on the settee," he ordered me when he himself needed a respite more than any one aboard.

I was asleep when Sparks crawled away.

IT WAS the old bridge over the canal back home and I stood midway, staring at the too heavy trucks roaring past. They shook the structure so I couldn't keep my footing. Many a time people had said the trucks would destroy that bridge and I had often pictured myself caught in the disaster. Lord, how it trembled! How I was tossed—

"Look at him, sir!" The helmsman had shaken me awake; he hurried back to the helm, pointing to a huddle on the floor beneath a window.

"Mr. Gavin!" I exploded and sprang.

I got hold to drag him to the settee. Had his heart starved to silence in that gaunt body? Were forty-three lives on my hands at last? I'd scarcely unwound him from his huddle when up he came. "Thanks, mister. No more of this," he grunted. Shaking himself, he moved to his window and stood, I thought, a bit more rigid, more willful.

But it had happened and his true condition was known only to himself, therefore I dared not close my eyes again. I studied his face over the compass, noted the set muscles, the narrowed eyes. "Come east another half point," he ordered. "Careful, boy, very gradual, don't let her swing."

"East!" I exclaimed. "Round to east of north? Wind's backing."

"You slept," G. G. said. "We're following the wind into the north. Ought to bring a change but the glass shows no promise yet."

"We'll be heading for Cape Mala, come daylight, sir."

"Heading for? How much have we gone to lu'ard in that direction, do you figure?"

My figuring startled me. "Cripes!" I cried.

"Yeah. That's had me on the hooks for hours," he admitted.

We all believed we'd seen the worst that wind could offer. More monstrous seas were inconceivable when darkness had set in. Water torn from their crests filled the air and the rain sounded like a never-ending cloudburst. But those hours after it came out of the north! Wind? Seas? My God!

Moments came when I was grateful for other factors to divert part of my attention from them. The helm, the tail shaft, the engine which had taken many another ship's lifetime of punishment—and above all, Mr. Gavin.

Throughout those black hours we rolled and pitched at crazy angles, went under to the guards and came out shaking with ever-mounting weariness. Every frame in her became tortured, the decks strained under terrific blows, yet the *Palowan,* so far, floated, came bare at times and fought her way up terrific slopes. But how was that human shadow at a window lasting? What had it taken out of him thus far which tropical heat and humidity hadn't quite drained from the very bones?

I waited for daylight to see. Each bell striking in the wheelhouse clock intensified my concern for who, I now knew, had the God-given faculty of becoming a part of the ship herself within hours. Not a word escaped him after we headed north; not once did he leave his lonely spot where rain rattled on the glass at his nose.

I dared not mention the increasing fury outside, the deafening scream of the wind, the whistling spray, the shuddering effect of unbelievable seas on her decks, the worse and worsening sluggishness of her bows under solid water. Aye, she did begin to root like a hog, to veer, to sheer and tardily come back too far. Swing, yaw, take it aboard and nose under; serious symptoms these, yet I said nothing. Something warned me to leave the man be.

First daylight registered on a gypsy head as a sea settled away from the big winch on the fo'castle head. I looked his way to see, finally, what the ordeal had left of him. G. G. was not there—but a hollow voice at the phone said, "Ease up on your engine? Practically hove to now; been so since around two hundred and we're falling away —what? . . . Why was I calling you? To talk about more r.p.m's, Chief—"

I GOT a look at him when he came away. The man I'd brought aboard us in Saigon had been supplanted. This strange apparition, this chemical product of the gale, was a wraith. The face had hollowed, the brow shone taut, the lips scarcely showed at all. And how the engine must be favored in the brunt of the worst wind and seas yet encountered!

Was G. G. appalled by it? Did it soften him to find himself finally down to those four essentials? Like a ghost he quit the phone but no ghost ever did move with his silent determination. His eyes windowed the courage of an unbeatable soul.

We tried her on eighty r.p.m. and fought with a double-manned helm to keep her heading between nor'nor'west and nor'-northeast. How long would the rudder endure? The steering engine? The oil pressure? G. G. began moving about with surprising agility from window to binnacle to helm to chart room. At the precise instant he'd grip a spoke and heave it up over to check a swing. He spoke the Chief again, came to me then and said, "Stanchions must be bent in number one. Awful pounding down there. Aerial's gone; haly'd's caught in the block on the stack."

Despite our best, she got away from us; only once, but the sea that hove her aside tore the port wing of the bridge to ruin. Soon more seas came in through that opening and stove in the door with a boom like Gene Krupa's drums.

Then we really got it. Came a sound like muffled rifles and I followed G. G.'s fixed stare; a crack had opened in the deck and reached toward number one coaming. The bow had stood too much. Another big one beat down onto the fo'castle head, swirled off into the well deck and rolled with her to the bulwarks. G. G. shouted something—the crack in the deck had lengthened to the coaming.

Now he was in a terrible fix. One of his "essentials," the engine, required easing. As a probable result, I then supposed, she had climbed too slowly and taken too much for'd; the cracked deck, with all it implied, looked like the first step toward her breaking up. I expected a hint of impending disaster in his brown eyes; instead, the jaws clicked shut, the fists hardened and a fire gleamed in his eyes.

Only one moment did he pause in thought, then came the quick decision which rated him far above his brother. He phoned the Chief for a period of all the power possible—"and Chief, it had better be good!"

He counted the revolutions as best he could, got the number he considered neces-

sary and turned to size up the broken door we had somehow jammed into its leaking hole. These done, he went out the other door and clung for his life to a rail, peering off into the surrounding sea.

Suddenly he came in as we rode off the third of three tremendous seas. Next minute the *Palowan* was on her way in that daring maneuver, turning around in a storm.

She took a terrific whaling. What remained of the acid vanished. The battered lifeboat wrenched away. Davits curled and the other boat was beaten to junk. Seas covered the after house, swarmed over the bridge and into the hole we'd plugged with remains of the broken door. Once she rolled nearly on her beam ends and hung there for long, sickening seconds until, mostly buried under green fury and foam, she gradually righted herself.

And the Old Man came croaking in the lower stair well!

G. G. ignored him in the life-and-death struggle. Not until he had us stern to the weather did he look down there, state the maneuver and the condition down for'd necessitating it and order me to see him back to bed. "Lash him in," he snapped.

EVENTUALLY we got the cargo for'd shifted to spare her weakness, I and the seamen who had huddled in the lower bridge short of food, exhausted and too aware of prolonged danger.

The wind finally eased, holes showed in clouds, monster seas rounded and far into the north, in due time, G. G. made out the low coastline. So I laid a course for the Big Ditch. We swung the *Palowan* and got there by the genius of that worn little human dynamo without cracking her more. How he stayed vertical, thought and moved around seemed miraculous to the Third.

Only the Old Man snorted at my praise of G. G. "Luck," he groaned and added something about lucky at cards and unlucky in everything else. But the very vitriol in Linus Gavin got him onto his feet again. Off Jupiter, he swayed on the top stair until his brother warned him without rancor, "Better go carefully, acid burns go deep, infection sets in quick."

He was right, but Linus laughed in his face and retorted, "I'll take my ship in, mister."

Every day he came above, each time for a bit longer. Off Hatteras the Third said, "You watch him, the Big Wind. He'll prop himself up on the bridge going into Boston and damned if he doesn't put it over on G. G. He always has, anybody can see that. No? Lay a tenspot on it?"

The Third had an uncanny way of being right, but I did kiss a tenspot good-bye.

We anchored at four-sixteen a.m., and the Old Man cursed the engineers for getting us in at that hour. The cussed grease monkeys had done it to prevent him, he said, from docking directly, taking revenge for the money they'd lost to him. But I caught a peculiar twinkle in G. G.'s eyes when he succeeded in getting his still invalid brother to go below and turn in. He, not the engineers alone, had timed us to anchor. Why?

The Blue Flag Line's doctor came out early. He caught Linus eating breakfast in bed. Then and there he gave the man a thorough physical. Linus roared, "Frame-up!" He howled for his brother. The doctor wasted no words on him, but G. G. dealt with him topside.

"Alcoholic is right, captain," he declared, "and he does show effects of the strain." He looked aft over the battered ship and said, "Raised ructions with her, didn't it? I suppose he himself blew a living gale, he hollers so."

"But he brought her through it," G. G. lied and I could have cursed him. Finally, however, he asked, "Then you'll hospitalize him, doctor?"

Their eyes met. Both smiled. "Captain, you win. We shall put him under the very best care available and he's going to have so much of it and so well and so long a time that he'll probably forget the difference between the West Indies rum he had cached and the saki he liked to have killed himself with."

Cap'n Grant Gavin docked the *Palowan*, but he stood his brother to the rail topside where he'd absorb the credit. Directly afterwards, however, by owners' orders the Old Man was helped to a waiting automobile en route to a "retreat."

I collected ten bucks from the Third.

Enterprise and Resourcefulness—Two Great Assets When Dealing with The East

Blame Those Who Die

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

A YOUNG man with pale blue eyes and a shy smile entered the offices of the Hindustan Aircraft Works at Bangalore and asked the clerk if he could see Mr. Duton. The clerk typed busily, and in about five minutes the stranger came back out of Mr. Duton's office. He and Mr. Duton stood at the door a moment. The young man held a sheet of paper with Mr. Duton's distinctive scribbling on it in his hand.

Mr. Duton was saying, "—and if your people find the installation doesn't suit them, fly the aircraft back here and we'll try a slower reverse gear in the drum."

"I'm certain that it will be acceptable. I merely take this sheet to Building 18, they'll wheel it out and I can fly it off?"

"Quite right. And we appreciate being able to do business with you."

The young man said a polite good day and left. Mr. Duton stood for a few moments after the outer door had closed behind the straight back, a pleased look on his face. "Nice young man," he murmured.

The clerk looked up into Duton's bland face and asked, "Sir?"

"Oh, was I speaking aloud? That's the young man from Harver-Crescent, Limited. He came to pick up that Norseman that we bought from the Americans. The one they had us install the special equipment on. He's flying it down to Ratmalana."

The clerk tried to sound interested as he said, "Yes, sir." Mr. Duton frowned down at the clerk in an absent-minded way, turned and walked back into his office.

The next act of the drama was at a big bungalow perched near the crest of a wooded hill about twelve miles south of Kandy, Ceylon. The heavy brush had been cleared from a wide level lawn in front of the building. Many round-clipped shrubs dotted the lawn. It was a quiet place, sleeping in the late sun of afternoon. Several groups of natives were working in the geometric rows of tea bushes that marched in straight columns down the cleared hill behind the house. At the sound of a distant motor, a stocky bearded man ran out onto the wide porch, shaded his eyes and looked off into the sunset glow. He stooped and picked up a large bell and a short iron bar from the porch floor. He beat on the bell, sending a harsh clanging down across the green tea. The workers looked up and came running toward the house. They ran out onto the wide lawn and in a few minutes had cleared off the rounded shrubs. The shrubs were growing in squat heavy pots.

The small plane circled and swooped down onto the lawn. It bounced and taxied to a stop near the western fringe of jungle. A man with yellow hair climbed down from the cabin, stretched, and then supervised the natives as they rolled the small aircraft into a small cleared spot in the jungle where the trees grew high overhead. They covered the ship with heavy green nets. In a few minutes the shrubs had been replaced, the natives had returned to their last half hour of the day working in the tea, and the young man had gone into the bungalow with the bearded man's arm around his shoulder. Dusk began to settle as the sun dropped behind the distant peaks.

WEDLEY hadn't much cared for his visitor. The man had stalked into Wedley's office in the New Delhi Secretariat as though he contemplated buying the building. His manner had been that of a master speaking to a bearer, and Wedley didn't like it at all. So Wedley had let the man stand and fume while he deliberately filled his pipe and lit it. When it was burning nicely, he looked up at his visitor and said, "Mr. Brown, I see no reason why I should grant your request."

The big man's face had purpled and he dropped heavily into the visitor's chair. "Now look, Webley, or whatever your name is. I flew over here from New York for the single purpose of speaking to this man Haidari Rama. When Rangoon was evacuated he had charge of hiding nearly five million dollars worth of merchandise which belonged to my firm. I find that you've got this man stuck away in some silly prison in Ceylon awaiting trial on political charges. Helping the Japs during the war or something. I don't give a damn about your silly politics or about the whole British Empire. I've waded through two weeks of your miserable red tape trying to find you, the man who can give me permission. And you start to get huffy. I won't stand for it. I want ten minutes alone with Haidari Rama and either you're going to make it possible, or I'm going to raise such an unholy stink through my associates in London that you'll spend the rest of your life explaining. My time is valuable, and I came over here myself because I thought something like this would crop up. Now, as you limeys say, hop to it, but give it a little thought first, because if you give me another no, you're going to be the most unhappy man in India. That I promise."

Wedley sucked on his face and glanced over into the dark hot eyes of the American. The man was big and he was angry. He

talked as though he could do just what he had promised. Wedley shuddered at the directness of the man, shrugged his shoulders helplessly and wrote out a note of permission for Mr. J. Haggard Brown to visit Haidari Rama, now held by the authorities in the political stockade on Island Seven near Galle, Ceylon. He shoved it across the desk to Mr. Brown.

A grin split Mr. Brown's face showing Wedley a line of tobacco-stained teeth. He picked up the note, glanced at it, shoved into his pocket and left, without a word of thanks to Wedley. The thin man sat at his desk for a time, biting hard on his pipe stem. For a time he thought idly of sending out some cables to test the truth of Mr. Brown's boasts. Then he sighed and turned back to the work piled high in his in-basket.

BACK of both the foregoing events were two men seated near a desk where they could look out of the window, down at the ceaseless roar of traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue. A gray-suited man who looked like a banker from the Midwest frowned at his younger nervous friend, and said, "Dammit, Bill, I wish you'd talked to me before you sent Harder to India on this case. He's only a kid, and if he scrapes our British cousins the wrong way, we are going to hear some loud angry noises from the State Department."

The younger man lit a cigaret and said, "You underestimate Ken Harder, Mr. Lee. He's smart and he's hard. Also, with that Rhodes scholar background he can melt into the picture over there. I told him that he has no authority to make any arrests, or create a stink. His job is to bust up the combine over there before they get into operation again. Since it was the biggest dope setup we ever ran into before the war I thought it would be a risk well taken."

"But I know something you don't know, Bill. J. Haggard Brown left for India by air ten days ago. You well remember that he was the one we had begun to suspect as the head of the outfit before the war put a crimp in their operations. His reputation is still snow white, but he's my bet for the brains behind the ring. And I think that he's smarter and harder than your fair-haired boy, Harder. I think you better call Harder back here, and we'll go back onto the old basis, checking their methods of getting it into the country, and checking the banks and cash balances to see if we can tip them over with the help of the treasury boys on a tax basis."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lee, but I can't call him back. He's out of touch. I don't know where he is or what he's doing."

Lee sighed and glanced at the ceiling as though imploring the gods to witness his suffering. "Okay, Bill. Okay! So you have to leave him there. I hope the kid comes out okay. If Brown gets onto him, he'll get twice as cautious on this end and we may never take him." Mr. Lee got wearily to his feet and clumped out of the office. Bill sat wearing a worried expression. He paced his small office for a time, and then, realizing that there was no action he could take to get Harder back, he sat down and reached for the phone.

It had been an exploit of the selfsame Ken Harder which was now causing Mr. Constance, the effeminate managing director of Harver-Crescent, Limited, sitting in Mr. Duton's office at the Hindustan Aircraft Works to drum nervously on the edge of the desk. "Mr. Duton," he lisped, "I quite fail to understand how you, a businessman, could be so easily taken in. Having that aircraft stolen will delay our inauguration of the island pickup and delivery service by several months. It's a ghastly situation."

Mr. Duton sweated a little more and said, "But, Mr. Constance, he was such a personable young man. And he had a letter on your firm's stationery. How was I to know that he was an imposter?"

"There seems to be nothing more to discuss. You say you have one more of those Norseman aircraft? Very well then. Get rush delivery on the special equipment from the United States. Install it and phone me in Colombo when it is ready. And this time, I will come up and ride back with the pilot. Good day, sir."

Mr. Duton sighed with relief when the door slammed behind Mr. Constance. Then he had to smile ruefully when he remembered how easily the young man with the yellow hair had walked in and flown off

with the aircraft belonging to Harver-Crescent.

HAIDARI RAMA was a slim brown man of indefinite age. He could have been thirty or fifty-five. He sat in the small stone visitor's room on Island Seven, his arms folded, staring into the angry eyes of the perspiring J. Haggard Brown. On Haidari's face was a condescending and amused expression—the expression of a man talking to a child.

"I am truly sorry, Mr. Brown," he said quietly, "but I cannot give you the information you ask. You will understand that it is my only bargaining point. So long as I know where I can lay my hands on a million and a half pounds worth of diacetylmorphine, opium and hasheesh, I am valuable to you and you will endeavor to get me my freedom. Should I tell you where to find it, and I assure you that it is safe, then I am of no further use to you and I can rot in prison."

"What are the charges? Will they stick? How can I get you off?"

The brown man shrugged. "One makes enemies," he said. "I dealt with the Japanese. What else was there to do? If they had won, I would have revealed to them the hiding place of the drugs. But they lost, and now those drugs must get me out of this confinement. You must find those who will be witnesses against me and bribe them to change their testimony. Or bribe others to testify that I was pretending to aid the Japanese but in actuality was working for the underground. It should be easy."

"When will you come up for trial?"

"Within the year."

"A year! You expect me to hang around this sticky stinking East for that long? I've got work to do in New York."

"In that case, if it is too much trouble for you, you had best forego any thought of regaining the drugs. I was happy to be an employee of you and your associates, but now I must strike out for myself and consider the stores as my own property until I gain permanent freedom. And, if you should leave, it might become necessary for me to mention your name in connection with my former occupation during my trial."

Brown clenched his big fists and ached to smash the sly smile on the brown face. He felt an inner chill as he realized how completely he was in the power of this suave educated native. It was no longer a case of merely regaining the stores of narcotics. It had become a question of survival.

After the launch had taken Brown back from the island, he sat for two hours on the shaded porch of the hotel at Galle, listening to the raucous babble of the thousands of crows in the big trees. He turned the problem over and over in his mind. If he could grab Haidari Rama off the island by force, he might be made to tell the location of the dope. Then he would have to be killed. But that would take many men and weeks of patient organization. He thought of the island, nearly a half mile square, with the watch towers at intervals. The entire place was like a small plateau jutting up out of the sea two miles off shore. A high wire fence had been built around the island, on the edge of the fifteen-foot rock drop into the crashing sea. The prisoners were allowed their freedom within the big enclosure. They lived in huts, cooked their own meals, and wandered around at will. The big enclosure was rough and rocky, with patches of thick brush and a few deep gulleys. Even if he could get reliable men, it would be no small task to storm the island and run off with Haidari. Besides, it would upset the entire British Empire. He thought some more. At last he came to a conclusion that was difficult, for J. Haggard Brown was a greedy man. He decided that it would be easier to have Haidari Rama killed, so that his lips would never babble the name of Brown in connection with a narcotics ring. It would mean giving up the stocks hidden in Rangoon, but there were other ventures that were beginning to shape up. He pursed his thick lips and began to devise a plan of execution, a plan that could never be traced to the pompous personage of Brown.

CLIVE GRANT stretched his stocky body, and the muscles of his shoulders and chest bunched under his thin shirt. Then he scratched at his black beard and looked across the dinner table at Ken Harder.

"I'll grant you, Ken, that you've had more luck than most, but it can't hold up. It won't hold up. Why if I ever thought when I met you at Oxford that I'd end up as a tea planter in Ceylon helping a crazy Americano like you in a mad scheme to break up a gang of international dope merchants, I'd have run away from you the first day we met. I'm afraid the authorities are going to get onto all this and ruin me, chase me off the island."

Harder looked lean and worried, as he answered, "Clive, I'd never have asked you to help if it weren't for the fact that these men are dealing with such a dirty business. I know that when the Japs entered Rangoon, their local manager hid or destroyed their entire stock of dope. If I know that outfit, I know they hid it. This man they have down on Island Seven, this Haidari Rama, is probably the only man that knows where it is. If I can get to him before the organization does, and find out where the stuff is, I can spoil a lot of business for them. Also, I will be able to prove to the British that Rangoon was one of the biggest focal points of the drug rings before the war. Then they will watch more closely and prevent their starting up again. They'll have to find another spot where conditions aren't so ideal. It'll be a big slap for the stateside organization. Even if they did chase you off Ceylon, Clive, my conscience wouldn't bother me too much, if at the same time we kept that enormous quantity of dope from reaching the world markets."

"But, Ken, stealing that aircraft! It was crazy!"

"It was my only chance of grabbing Haidari Rama, and I had to take it. Our only danger right now is that someone who doesn't work for you will spot it. I expect to be in Galle for about two days getting in contact with Haidari Rama. Then I'll come back here and tell you the future plans."

Grant sighed and said, "Well, Ken, you are that odd combination of idealist and man of action that goes around making the world exciting for old stooges like myself. Don't pay the least attention to my complaints. I think I'm actually enjoying it."

KEN HARDER had not been in his line of work long enough to have complete control over all of his muscular reflexes. Consequently, when he had breakfast served on the porch of the hotel at Galle, it was unfortunate that he was sipping his coffee when J. Haggard Brown walked out of the lobby. You don't look at pictures of a man for hours on end, wishing you could trip him up, without acquiring a pretty strong feeling about the man in question.

J. Haggard Brown stopped dead, and turned quickly to the left and stared at the young man who was coughing and gasping for breath, spraying coffee on the white table cloth. The faint memory of a description stirred in his mind—thin, young, blonde, pale blue eyes, an underling of Lee's—it might be the same one. Couldn't afford any risks. Better determine if the coughing was coincidence or shock of recognition. Brown walked over to the table and smiled down at the flushed face of Ken Harder.

"American, aren't you? Mind if I have my breakfast with you?"

Ken smiled, his mind racing, "Please do. I haven't run into many fellow countrymen down here. Afraid you caught me in an embarrassing moment. Got my coffee down the wrong way."

BROWN ordered, thinking at the same time that the young man was a little eager to explain the coughing, then he extended his hand and said, "I'm J. Haggard Brown of New York City." He figured that if he had been recognized, giving his name would do no harm, and if he hadn't been, his name would mean nothing to the young man.

"I'm Karl Harvey. Glad to know you," Ken said, smiling and shaking the beefy hand. The quick brain of Brown jumped onto the name, and dredged up the name of Lee's underling—Kenneth Harder. Same initials. Maybe to agree with initials on luggage. Maybe just carelessness. He felt a sudden thrill of alarm.

"You know, Mr. Harvey," Brown said gently, "you gave me a little shock when I saw you sitting there. Thought for a minute you were a fellow I met in Washington who works for a friend of mine named Lee. This fellow's name is Ken Harder. Looks a lot like you." As Brown spoke he kept his eyes closely on Harder's face. He saw the involuntary narrowing of the eyes, and the slight change of color. He

thought he detected a change in the rate of breathing. A careful observer can act much in the same way as a lie detector, watching carefully the changes induced by a sudden increase of adrenalin in the blood stream. Brown was a careful observer.

Ken felt trapped. He knew that he was giving himself away, and he couldn't prevent it. He decided to take a long shot. "Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Brown," he said, "my name is Ken Harder and I used to work for Henry Lee. Now I'm on State Department business, and traveling rather incognito. I would appreciate your keeping that information under your hat. I'm here on a question of rubber surveys." He smiled at Brown with as much candor as he could manage.

"Harder, I'm a frank man. I have to be. I don't have to tell you what my business is here. I know you boys have been gunning for me. I also know that you'll never get me, because I can think and act quicker than you can. I have a pretty good idea why you're here. Now there is no need for us to pretend to be dear friends. I've put you on your guard, but that is only because I don't consider you dangerous either on or off guard. Just don't get in my way. That's all. If you stay out of my way you have a good chance of growing old and gray in the service of bureaucracy."

Harder felt himself flush a bright crimson. He downed the rest of his coffee and walked away from the table. As he turned into the lobby he heard a chuckle that he was certain came from the throat of the offensive Mr. Brown. He felt childishly helpless. He went back up to his room and sat quietly for an hour re-planning his coming talk with Haidari Rama. He forced all emotions out of his mind and tried to make a plan that would take into account all of the factors introduced by the sudden appearance of Brown. He hadn't realized that the organization would move so quickly. He grinned when he thought of the horror with which Bill and Henry Lee would face the fact of Harder versus Brown.

WHEN the native who operated the launch asked to see Ken Harder's permit to visit the island, Ken handed him a folded hundred rupee note. The little man smiled and stepped aside, permitting Ken to climb into the launch.

When they coasted up to the dock, Ken climbed out and walked up to the wire gate. The big barrier opened for another hundred rupees. In fifteen minutes he was sitting in the small visitor's room, curiously appraising Haidari Rama. The Indian looked puzzled.

"Haidari Rama, my name will mean nothing to you, so there is no point in giving it to you. I know Brown, I know of you and I know of the concealed stores of narcotics in Rangoon." The Indian started visibly, and Ken continued, "It is highly improbable that you will ever leave prison in view of your past record of dealing with the Japanese. You would, in the course of events, have to stand trial."

"That is right, stranger. But Mr. Brown will see that I am not convicted. The stakes are high."

"You mean, don't you, that Mr. Brown will see that you never come to trial?"

Again the Indian looked puzzled, then his eyes widened. He lowered his voice, and said, "Do you imply that Mr. Brown will attempt to remove me from this island by force?"

"No, Haidari Rama. I mean that Brown will see that your mouth is shut forever. You will die suddenly on this island, and soon. The stakes seem large to you, but to Mr. Brown they are something which he can afford to give up rather than take the chance of publicity that might land him in prison. Freedom is worth more than wealth. And he has other large interests."

Haidari Rama sneered and said, "You try to frighten me! How could he kill me while I am on this island? It is foolish."

"If I wanted to kill you," Harder answered, "I would bribe my way out here again and talk to one of those here whose crime is so great that he cannot avoid execution. I would make certain that this man to whom I talked has a family who are poor. I would promise him to give his family five thousand rupees on the day he murders you. He would do it."

Haidari sat in deep thought, his forehead wrinkled. It was obvious that he was thinking of some of the other men who were on

the island, thinking of the freedom given the prisoners behind the wire, thinking of the hundred opportunities that any one of a hundred men would have to kill him. He glanced over at Harder, and there was fear behind his eyes, though he was trying to conceal it. He had seen the logic of the words spoken by the stranger with yellow hair. "And should what you say be true, what could I do about it? I am imprisoned."

Harder lowered his voice, leaned over the table and outlined a plan. At first Haidari looked dubious, then frightened. Harder argued and pleaded until at last he got a nod of agreement from the slim brown man, but the fear was still there.

On the trip back to the mainland, Harder sat hunched in the launch, exhausted by the strain. It had begun to look as though it might work. As he stepped off onto the dock he thought he saw a familiar stocky figure dart around the corner of one of the godowns, but he couldn't be certain.

That night he lay in his bed looking up at the dark ceiling, and there was murder in his heart. He felt that he had got enough of a confession from Brown to justify his acting as judge, jury and executioner. To eliminate Brown would be an act that would benefit the world. He tried to talk himself into it, but knew that he would be unable to. He cursed himself for being a meticulous, sensitive fool, but he knew he could never bring himself to the point of firing the cold-blooded shot, thrusting with the unsuspected knife.

TWO days later, at dusk, a small plane droned its way down the coast, several miles out from the prison island. The guards in the towers glanced at it for a time, then, as it began to recede in the direction of Colombo, they turned away. The little plane circled and found a protecting haze at five thousand feet. Then it headed directly toward the island. At three thousand feet the motor cut out. Some of the prisoners heard the sudden ceasing of the drone, and peered into the sky, but it was the time of day when dusk obscured the vision and the great floodlights had not yet been turned on. One brown man stood on top of the highest mound in the center of the island. He was far from any guard tower. The terrain was rough and overgrown where he was standing, so that it was not a popular place for the prisoners to congregate. He peered into the gathering dusk and suddenly saw the gliding plane swooping down toward him. He waved his arms. A package tumbled out of the plane and smacked onto the rocks near him. He heard the rush of wind as the plane swept over him, and then the motor caught with a roar as the plane zoomed upward. Guards and prisoners all over the island were startled by the sudden roar. A few minutes later the floodlights were switched on, but the plane was far away. Haidari Rama buried the precious package under some loose rocks and headed across the island toward his hut.

Harder and Grant sat on the porch steps while Harder explained the plane's special equipment. He had made a rude sketch of a heavy drum and a large handle. "Now, Clive, the thing is almost automatic. You swing the arm straight out from the side of the ship and latch it in place. Then let the cable pay out by pushing the lever back until the white band on the cable is next to the pulley at the end of the arm. That means that I'll have fifty feet of cable. Then lie on the floor with your head out the door when I dive. I'll pull up sharp and you give me a circle with your fingers if I've made contact. If I'm too high, estimate the number of feet and show me with your fingers. Then I'll come around and try again. When I make contact, the drum will unwind fast, and gradually brake to a stop. Then it will start winding up the other way. You watch and when the end of the cable gets up to the pulley, push the handle back as far as it will go. Then help him in." They walked out to the plane to look at the drum and check how much gas was left.

Henry Ames, the island medico, reported to the prison commander as ordered. "Yes sir," he said, "I checked on this Rama and I figure he's maybe going out of his head. We'll have to watch him. He is over on the big knoll, and he has cut himself a couple of sticks maybe twelve feet high, using sharp rocks to cut 'em with. He's got a notch on the top side of each of the sticks, and he's got 'em propped up in the dirt and rocks maybe twenty feet apart. He acts nervous, but I don't see as how he can do any harm. He smiled at me and mumbled something I couldn't catch. When I left he

was picking up all the rocks in a big space between the two sticks and throwing them over to one side." The commander looked puzzled, and gave the medico permission to leave.

Back on the knoll, Haidari Rama looked carefully around. There was no one within two hundred yards of him. He scuttled down a rocky slope and uncovered the bundle that had been dropped. He ripped the burlap covering off of it and took out a complicated harness made of wide bands of heavy canvas with many buckles. After three times he managed to get the rig on and tighten all the buckles. It went around his body at the chest and waist and around his upper arms and thighs. The second item in the package was a loop of rubberized rope sixty feet in diameter. He carried the rope up to the poles and stretched it carefully across the two so that he had a sagging length of rope hung loosely between the two poles. Then he walked to a position midway between the two poles and about twenty feet away from an imaginary line drawn between them. He reached back over his shoulder and clipped the loop of the rope into a massive snap on the heavy straps which protruded between his shoulder blades. Looking over his shoulder, he sat down midway with his back toward the poles and inched forward until the rubberized rope swung clear of the ground. An imaginary line between the two poles would have formed the base of an equilateral triangle, with the sitting figure of Haidari Rama as the apex.

A group of the other prisoners noticed the strange activity on top of the knoll and came walking over, their faces filled with curiosity. When they asked questions, Haidari Rama replied in senseless babbling, and when they approached too closely, he screamed and roared with such venom that they dropped back. The universal fear of madness kept them many feet from him. They muttered and stared. Surely the man was mad. For what purpose would he sit in the sun with a great loop of rope fastened to his back. Haidari Rama stared straight ahead into the afternoon sky.

The guard on the central tower on the north side of the island was the first one to see the small plane. It came steadily toward the island at about fifteen hundred feet. He looked at it curiously, wondering whether the pilot would realize his mistake and swing out to sea, or would pass directly over the island in direct violation of existing orders. The plane came steadily on.

The group near Haidari Rama babbled and pointed up at the plane as it approached. They didn't notice the sitting man draw his knees up, clasp his arms around them and drop his head forward as he had been instructed. They watched the plane. In sudden alarm they saw it nose down and start a steep glide toward them. They shouted and scattered into the rocky ravines. Those who looked back saw a big hook swoop down toward the sitting man, skim over his head and catch the rope.

Haidari Rama felt a sudden wrench that strained every joint and muscle in his body. Then he was swinging and spinning in the air. He caught one flash of the startled faces turned up at him, and he wanted to laugh through his fear. The far fence flashed under him and then there was only the blue sea. He looked up and saw that the body of the plane was coming gradually closer. He was drawn up close to an arm that projected out beside the wide door of the cabin. Then hands reached for him and he was dragged in out of the blinding wind, into the roar of the cabin. A strange man slammed the cabin door and then started to help him with the straps and buckles.

Back on the island the prisoners walked up the knoll and looked at the spot where the man had been sitting. They they looked at the two poles. One of them was still standing. Then they turned and looked south. The plane was still visible, a speck that was fast disappearing. They shook their heads and muttered.

THE Superintendent of Police in Colombo tried in vain to interrupt the flow of language coming over his telephone. Then he sat and listened patiently until Mr. Constance had finished. He sighed and said, "Yes, Mr. Constance. We are willing to admit that the aircraft mentioned in the papers was the one which was stolen from Hindustan Aircraft, the one on which you had them install the snatch-up equipment for island package delivery. But, Mr. Constance. we still do not know where the aircraft is. We would like very much to

find it. Delhi is very interested. It has been reported in newspapers all over the world. Everybody is interested. I assure you that we are trying to locate the aircraft, and as I promised you before, when we find it, you shall have it. . . . That's right. . . . Good-bye, Mr. Constance." He hung up and took the liberty of thumping himself several times on the forehead with a big hairy fist. He roared and listened to the sounds of feet scurrying toward his office.

Meanwhile J. Haggard Brown sat down in his room and tried to relax. He shut his eyes, but it was of no use. Each time he thought of the way Haidari Rama had been snatched out of his hands, his pulse drummed, his breath came fast and a red haze seemed to creep up in front of his eyes. He knew he would have to think quickly and coldly. There was too much at stake for him to be emotional about it. It was a cold hard game he was in, a profitable game —but the penalty for failure was as high as the profits. He shut his eyes and all he could see was the smooth young face of Harder. He jumped to his feet and paced to the window. He muttered, "My guess is that they're still in Ceylon, and now they don't dare use the plane again. There is only one way to get off this island inconspicuously, and that is by way of the Talimannar ferry. It's a long shot, but it's worth it if I can get my hands around the neck of that milk-fed puppy." He clenched his fists and enjoyed the image of Harder's pale blue eyes bulging from their sockets. He picked up the room phone and called the desk, asking for information on the times trains left for Colombo. He realized that in Colombo he could obtain a fast car and a driver.

MR. CONSTANCE didn't wait for his driver to open the door of the sedan. He jumped out and ran through the administration building at Ratmalana Airport. He stopped and stared. There it was. The plane that had been stolen. He saw the big arm for the snatch-up equipment folded along the side. He heard a footstep beside him and turned to find the polite smile of the airport manager beaming at him. "You must be Mr. Constance. The pilot from Hindustan Aircraft delivered it this morning. Told me to phone you."

Mr. Constance glared at the little man. "You utter and absolute fool! That is the aircraft that was stolen, the one someone used to snatch up the political prisoner at Galle. He's laughing at you right now. You better phone his description to the police." The manager looked for a moment as though he were going to break into tears. Then he spun and hurried toward his office. Mr. Constance sniffed and walked out toward the Norseman.

KEN HARDER shook his head slowly at Clive Grant and said, "I don't like it, Clive. There should be some other way to get the information out of him."

"Nonsense, Ken! I know these people. Besides you haven't got time to try any other way. Appuhamy will handle him." He poured out two more drinks and grinned through his beard at the depressed face of Harder.

At that moment a smiling stocky native stepped into the room and said, "Excuse, Master. The Indian says he will speak now."

"Have him brought in, Appuhamy."

The shambling figure of Haidari Rama, supported between two of the house boys, was brought into the room and dropped, shuddering, into a chair. His face looked gray under his brown skin, and his eyes rolled wildly.

"Now, Haidari Rama," Harder said gently, "if you had kept your promise which you made to me in the visitor's room on the island, all this wouldn't have been necessary. But you had to be sly. You had to threaten me with exposure for my part in your liberation and refuse to tell me where the stocks of narcotics are hidden. You will tell us now, I understand?"

The Indian tried to speak, but he couldn't control his trembling mouth. He shivered and looked over his shoulder at the grinning face of Appuhamy. "They will not touch me again, please? Not again?"

"Not if you tell the truth."

Haidari Rama leaned toward Harder and the words came out with a frantic rush. "Man named Bailu—big house near Shwe Dagon Pagoda—garage back of house. It is made with concrete blocks. Blocks all hollow except top rows. Everything stored inside the blocks—waterproof—nobody could

ever find it. The two coolies who helped conceal it are dead."

Grant turned to Appuhamy and said, "He lies. Take him out again." Haidari Rama screamed and slid off the chair in a dead faint. Grant grinned and turned to Harder. "Guess the beggar is telling the truth. Had to find out for certain."

On instructions from Grant, the servants picked up the still figure of the Indian and carried him out to the room which had been prepared for him in the wing. "Well," Harder said, "that appears to be that. Let me borrow your car and driver and I'll go down to Kandy and send off some wires. I got the plane back okay, and with just a little more luck we can squeak out of this without a word from anybody."

"I certainly am praying that the luck holds. I like this island, and I never realized what a stink grabbing that Indian would cause."

In a few minutes the big car was roaring down the dusty road into Kandy. Harder sat in the back seat wondering where Brown was and what he was thinking.

THE NEW Superintendent of Civil Police sat and stared at the yellow wire for many long minutes. Then he called in his brightest assistant and gave a few unbelievable instructions. A few minutes later two cars drew up in front of the bomb-shattered home of Mr. Bailu. The house was deserted, but the garage was intact. Several native families were living in it. They all screamed with rage when the husky policemen attacked the stone walls with sledges and crowbars. When the first heavy stone was pried loose and fell to the ground, the young assistant stepped up and picked up the small plump bag that had fallen out with the stone. He ripped it open carefully and fingered the crystalline powder. Then he gave instructions to have the families moved out. He told the men to halt further work until he had called the headquarters and reported.

Haidari Rama, feeling weak and upset, stood by the stern rail of the Talimannar Ferry. He saw the white-clad figure of Harder walk back the length of the dock. Harder's last words resounded in his ears, "Haidari Rama, I should have turned you back to the authorities, because you tried to withhold the information you promised. But I am letting you go because I am confident that you will be picked up soon. If you went back to the island now, I believe that Brown would have you killed." As he stood and watched the shore line recede, he heard a sharp noise and felt a blow against the railing on which he was leaning. He wondered what it was, and leaned over so he could inspect the other side of the rail. He never felt the rifle bullet which crashed into his skull, nor did he hear the distant crack of the weapon above the noise of the surf and the pulse of the heavy engines of the ferry. He slumped over the rail and stuck in a grotesque standing position, his brown hands hanging down toward the blue water.

J. Haggard Brown gave one last look through the telescopic sight of the hunting rifle. Beyond a doubt the man was dead. He climbed to his feet and walked back through the scrub palm and brush to the waiting car. The waiting driver smiled inquiringly, and then when he saw that the red-faced master was carrying no game, his face dropped into an expression of sympathy. In the back of his mind he had a wondering doubt at what the master could find to shoot at on a sandy beach so near the ferry landing, but he soon discarded it. Only a complete fool attempted to find reason behind the actions of a white man!

Brown felt as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The chance that Haidari Rama would unmask him was gone. But now there was another opponent who had grown greatly in stature since that breakfast in Galle. Undoubtedly Harder knew the location of the narcotics. Also, Harder would make a great effort to connect Brown with the dope, but Brown knew he had small chance of success. But the next time—if the occasion presented itself, Ceylon might be an excellent spot to avoid future trouble from a man who had the ability to follow a trail and formulate and execute plans which were startling in their boldness. He felt a sneaking admiration for a man who would steal a plane and lift a prisoner right off a prison island in broad daylight. If only one of the Spits from Ratmalana could have arrived in time with loaded guns, the two birds would have been killed with one stone. Too bad Harder

didn't seem the type who might be bribed to change sides. With a mind like that he could——

Harder found Clive standing in the shade of the bungalow. The bearded man looked up with a question in his eyes as Ken approached.

"Like clockwork," Harder said. "Got him on the boat okay, and stopped off in Kandy on the way back. We did right to take a chance on it. The wire from Rangoon says, 'Material found as per instructions.' Now I can head back."

"I'll be sorry to see you go, Ken. It is going to be rather dull with no stolen aircraft on the place, no Indians for Appuhamy to work on, no arguments."

They went into the house for a last meal and drink. Across the valley on the side of a small hill nearly several hundred yards from the front porch of the bungalow, J. Haggard Brown shifted to a more comfortable position and adjusted the rifle sights to the range. From the hill he could see the glint of the blue car which his driver had parked beside the dusty road. It had been no trick to follow Harder from Talimannar. He cradled the rifle against his shoulder, the smooth stock touching his florid cheek and sighted at the front door of the bungalow. He waited with the patience of a man who knew that his self-imposed task was worthwhile. While he waited he planned his next moves. A quick run down to the car. Explanations to the driver. A fast run to Colombo. Sata Airlines to Calcutta. Then Transoceanic Airlines to the West Coast. If he handled it right, he could be in New York before Lee found out that his man Harder was dead. Then there would be work to do. New methods of importing the stuff. A new collection base in the East. He sat in the hot sun and dreamed of a newer, bigger empire than he had enjoyed before the war. He even hummed a little.

A movement by the door of the bungalow brought him to sudden attention. He held the rifle more tightly and tried to estimate the strength of the wind. Two figures walked out of the house. The one with the shorts would be Harder's host. The two walked over toward the waiting car and stood talking. Brown leveled the sights on the middle of the back of the man in the long trousers. He moved the sights a shade to the right to allow for the wind. He held his breath and slowly squeezed the trigger—

For a fraction of a second Harder didn't realize what had happened. Clive had been standing in front of him, smiling and holding out his hand. Then he staggered backwards, with sort of an odd dance step. He had an expression of surprise and apology on his face. He folded slowly onto the grass and a red stain began to seep through the linen fabric of his shirt. There was a black hole in the middle of the stain. Harder dropped behind the car. He reached out and grabbed Clive's ankles and pulled the unconscious man toward him, into the shelter of the body of the car. He remembered that just as Clive had fallen, he had heard a faint crack that seemed to come from back in the hills. The crack of a rifle.

He tore Clive's shirt away from his chest and realized that a doctor was needed quickly. But he couldn't move away from the car with any safety. He bunched his leg muscles and then, like a starting sprinter, ran for the house. He dodged from side to side as he ran. He found Appuhamy, told him what had happened, and then phoned the Kandy hospital with the dread in his mind that they would be too long in arriving. By the time he had hung up, Appuhamy was back with a massive Webley service pistol. Harder grabbed it in his sweating palm and ran out the back of the house. He cut down through the tea and then angled over to the shelter of the jungle. He worked his way through the tangle of brush, the vines clutching at his clothes, a cloud of insects around his sweating head. He worked his way upwards, trying to keep out of the sight of whoever might be on the high slopes ahead. He remembered his own qualms at taking the law into his own hands while he was in Galle. If he had then Brown would have been eliminated and Clive would be unhurt. He had a cold singlemindedness of purpose, to smash a slug from the heavy pistol into the beefy head of J. Haggard Brown.

After an hour of cautious climbing and scrambling through the brush he came to a clear spot on the side of a hill. He looked out through the leaves and saw the bungalow far below. He stopped and examined every foot of the side of the hill opposite.

As he started to move again, the sun, getting low, struck a bright object in the brush not thirty feet away. He ducked silently behind a thick palm, and then stuck his head out until he could examine the spot from which the sudden glitter had come. He could see nothing.

Slowly and more cautiously he climbed higher. When he looked again he saw a shoe protruding from the brush. It was in the position of a man stretched out on his stomach. Then he saw the ankle. He drifted forward across the open space. When he could see the back of the man's head and could recognize the reddish-brown hair of Brown, he leveled the pistol and shouted, "Drop your gun, Brown! Stand up!"

MR. LEE, the nervous man named Bill and Kenneth Harder sat in the small office overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue. Harder had run through the story once, and Mr. Lee was asking questions.

"Ken, how on earth could you have managed to pick that Indian up off the island? How did you know you wouldn't kill him?"

"When I was flying for Troop Carrier I snatched up a few gliders. Read a training manual on picking up personnel. Knew how it was done. Had to take a chance on not killing him, but I figured it wouldn't be any great loss if I did. If I hadn't dragged him out of there, Brown would have found some way to get him killed. He finally managed it anyway. Poor Haidari Rama was destined for a short life the minute they stuck him in that prison island. It was luck that when I phoned Hindustan about snatch-up equipment they told me that they only had one on hand for this Harver-Crescent outfit. I walked in, grabbed a sheet of their office stationery and made myself an official letter. With a full tank I had just enough gas for the running around I had to do."

"But how did you stay clear of the British? They should have been pretty sore at you. You broke a few local laws, you know."

"That was the easiest part of it. While Clive was getting his health back they had a lot of investigations. The thing was, they were so embarrassed at having me uncover all that stuff right under their noses in Rangoon, that they didn't realize I was the one who took the plane and snatched Haidari. I blamed it all on old J. Haggard and his imaginary associates. By luck, they didn't get me and the Ratmalana Airport fellow together, and they didn't take me up to Bangalore. They were happy to forget the whole thing."

"That business with Brown at the last must have been rough."

"That was the worst of it. I stood there with that Webley aimed at the back of his head and told him to stand up. He didn't do it, but I saw him quiver a little and knew he was alive and listening. I walked closer to him until I was standing right near his feet and told him again. He still didn't move, so for luck I plugged one into the ground right next to his shoulder. That did it. He gave this bubbling scream and turned around, sitting up and clawing at the fat brown thing on his throat. He didn't even see me. His eyes stuck out and he gave one shuddering breath and stopped clawing at the thing. Then he began to stiffen up, and even as I stood there I could see his face swelling and growing dark. The fat brown snake let go of his throat and started to writhe away. I got it through the head. They told me later that it was a krite. You don't see many of those in Ceylon. North India is usually the place for them."

"I wonder why he didn't get away from it?"

"I figure that when he fired the shot which hit Clive, the darn thing was disturbed and either dropped out of a tree right in front of his face, or crawled up close to him before he saw it. He had enough sense to hold still, and that snake must have been looking him in the eye from a distance of a few inches while I worked my way up the hill. He knew he was gone as soon as he moved. The shot that I fired actually killed him. It startled the snake."

Oil Can Versus Six-gun

Three Toots for Trouble

By LARS RAYMER

BEHIND me, Hank Judd lets out a beller. Hank's got a trumpet call like a bull. I hear him, plain enough, for all the hissing roar of the old steamer. I hear him, before Jess Ross, the fireman, takes his eyes off the grate and looks at me, signaling for a stop.

But I look back at the plows before I choke her off. A steam engine without no clutch—which you stop by pulling the gears out of mesh—you don't stop no oftener than you have to. Hank's standing there on the platform of the eleven bottom plow, jabbing with that iron bar of his at one of the furrows of sod that ain't turning right.

He's got a rock, all right.

So I heave back on the controls, and the steam giant quits her forward crawl and snorts a cloud of smoke around us. Jess puts on another shovel of coal, and shuts the draft.

"What's the matter with you?" I bark at Hank. "Tryin' hinder the plans of the great Northern Transcontinental?"

Hank Judd grins, and just keeps poking with his crowbar. He don't mind my joshing him none. He's just as anxious to do this job right as I am. He don't even bother to answer, with all the noise we're in.

But somebody answers. I have to shift the direction of my gaze. I see five riders. They're fighting their mustangs, spur and

bit. Ever' puff of my steamer, them saddlers go wild, pitching and trying to vacate out of there. The big guntoter on the near horse has lost a stirrup, and he's clawing air plenty. I let out steam, and all five broncs cut loose to stampede.

Jess and Hank and me—we're enjoying the circus. But I ain't aiming to make trouble for anybody. I ain't hard-hearted enough to want anybody hurt.

So I shut the throttle, so steam just sizzles with a gentle hiss.

Then them buckeroos can set their broncs back on their haunches and haze them in till they're in looking distance of my plowing outfit.

The lead one, he is so big he's topheavy on his cayuse. He's got a loud mouth, too—louder than even Hank—but I can't make out what he's saying so long as he's wrestling his black saddler.

But I don't like what I do hear first.

"Come yere," he yells at me. "So I can talk to yuh."

I stay right here, high up on the tractor. "Come here, yourself, if you got anything to say," I bawl right back at him. "I'm an engineer. My job's here."

Henry Judd is still ramming at the rock. It's wedged between the blade—the one, to get technical, that cuts the sod on the landside (before the days of rolling coulters)—and the plowshare. The rock stays put. Although Hank is puffing and cussing until he's steaming worse than the tractor.

Most times, Jeff or I'd get down and help him. But not with this here crowd of cow waddies looking on, we ain't doing any such thing. We just leave him tussling the damn thing until he gets it moved for himself.

Standing on the tip of one toe and reaching up for a lever, Hank puts his weight on it. There's eleven levers. One for each share. Each's raised and lowered and regulated by its own. A guy like me who's been East and got himself an engineer's license, ain't supposed to be down there dangling on a lever, doing muscle work, before the natives.

Big boy on the black horse keeps yelling.

"What's this about the railway company?" he asks.

I know he's heard what I say about the Transcontinental, to Hank, but I yell his words back, "What about it?"

"What's the Northern Transcontinental got to do with your plowin'?"

I still dodge him. "What's it to you?"

"I'm Wate Boyd. Gotta spread up the creek here. You're on my range."

Now we're getting somewhere. I've heard of him. I know now how to talk to the cow poke.

"This's railroad land," I tell him. "The railway company got it from the government for buildin' its road through here."

"I know that," he sasses. "But the railroad ain't plowin' it up."

He's wrong there, so I tell him, smug in my knowledge, "Yes, it is. To raise flax. Don't you know this's good flax country?"

I see I got him there. He don't like it. He's been getting free grass on open range here, and ain't letting it go if he can help it.

Looking at him, sitting there scowling, I'm remembering the stories about him. He's a looker—and knows it. Smooth features, under bright new black hat. That olive skin of his is as soft as a girl's. Not weathered, nor leathery, like the rest of us who's rode the prairie. He's got broad shoulders—jutting almost too wide from spotted black-and-white calfskin vest. Waist thin, in tight black shirt and pants. Spotted dog chaps to match the vest. His saddle and bridle and tapaderos and gun holster are all polished black, too, with white rawhide inlays.

He's handy with that gun, the stories say. And his top brag is, for all his bullet-swapping, he's never been hurt, to make him limp, or leave any scar. There's nothing to mar them pretty features. Nothing to keep him from being the kind of dude the girls all go loco over.

"It's so, then," he yelps, about the flax. "The Transcontinental is tryin' to bring settlers in here to homestead this land?"

"It's so," I tell him. "The day of big cattle spreads is done, in this part of Montana."

"Not on my range, it ain't."

WITH them words, he's got a new boasting note in his tone. He's puffing like a prairie cock getting ready to drum before the hens. And that's just it. His eyes keep roaming from me, and I follow their direction, and there she is. A girl, all decked out in too-bright colors—shimmery silk shirt scarlet as the cactus flower, pearl-

gray riding skirt shorter than most wear them, white hat and gloves.

"What's the matter, Wate?" she asks, with bold familiarity.

Pretty boy waves toward my outfit. "Plowin' my grass."

She turns on me a look that should've withered me where I stood.

But I keep on looking at Wate Boyd. "You can't help it—and neither can I," I preach at him. "It's a change comin' spite of you or me. Get smart—get in with the change. I've punched cows, and like it. But I'm keepin' in tune with the times."

The girl adds words to her look: "Turnwether. Joining the nesters."

"The settlers'll come," I say. "A good yield of flax will bring them. This's the week to plant for a bumper crop."

"You'll never get it in this week." Boyd is strutting again. "You'll not raise any flax here." There's threat in them words.

Hank's got the rock out and is lowering the plowshare by now. So for answer to Mister Wate Boyd I just open the throttle. Steam belches out in one great snort. Six cowhorses go pitching and running again. The big boy's black is worse than the rest. He tries to get over to help the girl, but she's doing better than he is.

I jerk the gear in mesh, and feel the bulk yank forward at its one speed—two miles an hour, half the gait of a good walking horse.

NEXT morning it's my turn to go stoke her up before breakfast. Jess's got a fire banked in her all night, you know. It's an hour before sunup, and ever' thing's dusky around there. I'm still half asleep. I pokes up a blaze and starts slapping on coal.

Then it comes to me things ain't right. Awful quiet and empty sounding for a steamer. I can hear the lime-crust cracking in her as the heat starts. I look, and sure enough there ain't a drop of water left in the boiler. One drain cock is turned a little —just enough to let it leak out. There's our water, making a puddle under the engine. And here's our boiler, burned dry.

There ain't nothing to do but call Shorty Rathert and the tank wagon to fill her up before we even get the fire going. That takes hours. Sure put us out. Ain't plowing that day until the day's half gone.

I let into cussing Jess Ross. But Jess is cussing himself: "Any gol-damned fireman —even a flunky—ought to know enough to look to see all the spigots turned right. I'd a bet my shovelhand ever' one of 'em was right last night."

Hank tells him, "Well, they weren't."

"Can't afford no more fool waits like this," I tell them. "We're gettin' this plowin' done this week, if we got to sleep right on the engine."

Jess looks at me quick. "What you mean?"

"I mean I think somebody turned that plug, tryin' to ruin our boiler."

I TAKE Jess and Hank into Goudy's saloon for a few straights after work. There's Shorty, against the bar, steadying himself with one hand, and trying to get a glass to his mouth with the other.

"I won't go!" he squalls, at sight of us. "'Tain't no use. You can't take me. I won't go."

"That's all right," I say, nice. "You come when you like."

"I ain't goin'," he blubbers. "I ain't goin' at all."

"We didn't come for you," I explain. "Just stopped for a drink. Didn't even know you was here."

"They'll shoot me if I go," Shorty insists. "I can make more lots of places than workin' for you."

"Nobody said anything about shootin'," I say, though I'm afraid it's so.

"Yes they did—the cowmen—they say I'm a turnsheep, helpin' plow up our own grass."

I don't like this.

No use raising a ruckus with my help in a public place. All I can do is tell him I'll see nobody bothers him, and raise his wages, so he's getting gun hire for that job of his hauling water to the steamer. I promise him all that, just to keep him, and shut him up. He's a good water boy. But he's scared.

Then I buy him a few, to be a good fellow, and no hard feelings. I don't need many till he's out, complete. We have to hire a wagon to take him back to camp.

"WHERE'S that Tim?" I yodel at Jess. "He's hours past due."

It's mid-afternoon, and this's a day we're

getting some real plowing done. We're stopped at the end of the field to fuel up.

Jess Ross just grins white teeth through sootdusk mask. He shrugs and bellows, above the roaring draft of the grate, "You know boys! Tim's probably fishing or else huntin' agates, along the creek."

The only thing Tim's supposed to be after, down in the creek badlands, is coal. Tim Scholtz's our strawboy. Or what we called a strawboy back east on a threshing outfit. His job is supplying fuel for Jess Ross to keep the old boiler thumping. He's been hauling coal picked from outcropping strata along the creek.

Jess climbs over into our supply wagon. I take a look. The coal's pretty near gone.

"Ain't 'nough for another round," I volunteer.

Jess looks at the skyline, as if that'll make Tim hove in sight. "Should be here, any time."

Hank Judd yells from the plows, "Ain't waitin' on that drag tail, are we?"

We're all remembering that the week's getting pretty well along without much sod busted up.

I reach for the whistle cord. Steam shrills out in three short, strong, ear-tearing blasts. Through the quiet, dry Montana air, they carry far. Even far as to the creek where Tim went.

Far enough for anybody who knows steam engine signals to know we're short of coal and have to stop if we don't get it.

We all stand a minute looking at the hill where Tim's supposed to pop up first. Nothing there. Jess shovels the last of the coal from the wagon into the fuel box on the engine. He stokes the grate. We take a last look at the hill. No Tim.

I jerk her in gear. The eight-foot-high drive wheels dig the turf, and we move forward, turning over to the sun eleven stiff belts of black prairie sod.

THAT takes power. I like the feel of it —cut the steam till the gear is in, and feel the piston push over slow and hard, just enough steam pressure to move her. Then open the throttle and feel the speed climb against the load. That takes power, I say; that takes coal under the boiler.

I shoot another look at the hill. I yell and point. I know by the look on Jess's face he's seeing what I see. Then Hank sees it, too. A horse—a lone horse with harness on —galloping wild. It's one of Tim's.

I want the boys to stay there while I go look. But they say no sir, they ain't missing nothing. We quit her right there. Stop her, and bank the fire, and leave her standing while we go chasing, afoot, over them tall-grass plains.

Must be two miles we go before we see the wagon. Upset. The coal is strewed along over the prairie, lost in the bunch-grass. One horse is still with the wagon—killed by the load rolling over it. The other busted loose—the one we seen hightailing it for nowhere.

We go back the trail until we find Tim, too. He's in the grass where the wagon's rolled over him. Laying in blood, we think first he's dead. But not yet. He's pretty well smashed, and needing a doctor bad.

His own six-gun is empty. He's not a slugshy like Shorty. He carries a gun and knows how to use it. There's blood everywhere in the grass, and all of it can't be his. He's weighted some of them with lead. The way we read sign, they've had trouble getting away from there, on limping horses.

I look at Hank. Hank looks at Jess. They both nod their heads. So I say it—what we're all thinking: "That Boyd—drain our boiler —stampede our coal team—he'll do anything to keep us from plowin'—"

We don't either, no more that day. We have to go flag down Shorty Rathert, with the water wagon. It's the only rig we got left to take poor Tim Sholtz on, to a doctor.

Shorty turns green when he sees Tim. He looks around quick-like, and his right hand feels for his gun.

"They said they'd do it!" he gurgles. "They said they'd kill us if we helped you!"

The gun wages he's been so proud of don't look good to him now.

"I'll take Tim in town," he admits. "But you'll have to come after your wagon. I'm quittin'!"

No use arguing with him.

We go in town with him. We've got to hunt us both a strawboy and a waterboy, and another team. While the fire burns out and the boiler gets cold on the steamer, for lack of coal.

"I wish," I tell Hank and Jess, "Wate

Boyd'd come out in the open. This fightin' him through cowards is gettin' me throwed."

I GET' my wish. We're at it again, with full crew, and it looks like we might still get plowing done, when the six riders come in person. The girl's with them.

They ride along out there on the unplowed side, watching us. They yell at us and signal for us to stop, but we don't pay them no heed. Ever' time they get too close, I let the old steamer belch, or else give them a sharp blast on the whistle, and their horses go skedaddling out of there.

We get to the end of the field, and have to stop for coal. Jess's shoveling it in from the supply wagon, Hank's polishing a moldboard, and I'm giving a squirt of oil to the boxings, when Wate Boyd leaves his black horse and comes swaggering over. He's sure remembering the girl's watching his ever' move.

"You can't get done this week!"

I squint at the oil hole I'm cleaning out. "If you can help it?" I jeer.

"You just can't. You're behind already. You ain't fillin' your contract. It's gettin' too late to plant flax."

"That's up to the Transcontinental and me to figure out, I reckon."

He comes closer. He's a big lout, all right. Stands a half a hand above me, and maybe fifty pounds heavier. His leer ain't pretty, even on his fancy face.

"Make you a deal. Pull outa here now, and I'll double what the railway's payin'."

"Easy money!" I snort. "But I kinda like this old steamer, and I think I'll go ahead tinkerin' her along on this job till it's done."

Then I give Jess the eye. "'Nough coal, ain't it?" I yell at him. He catches on. I'm tiring of this here conversation. Truth is, my temper's getting high.

But Jess—nor I—ain't fast enough. I just get to the ladder at the corner of the high platform, ready to climb up, when Watt Boyd takes another step. He reaches out a paw and clamps it on my shoulder.

"You ain't plowin' no more," he says.

I don't try to get loose. I don't even move, far as he knows. But I turn my oil can. And press my thumb. A spurt of lube goes right on his griping fingers. He jerks back like he's burnt, forgetting to hold me at all. He shakes that hand like it was ruined entirely. Before that girl, he ain't standing for nothing spoiling his looks. There's a mad, vengeful look in them eyes.

I go swinging up the ladder. As soon as I'm on the platform, I jerk the gear lever, and open the throttle. She leaps like a bucking steer out of the chute.

The plows start so sudden Hank goes stumbling across the platform. But he's on his toes by the time we hit the plowing. And he drops them eleven plows, one by one, each with its own lever, as it crosses the end furrow. That takes a plowman, with me giving her full steam that way.

I look back at Wate Boyd. He's got a white silk handkerchief out, wiping at his hand. His face's red as the girl's shirt. And I see the reason; she's sitting over there smiling at the trick I played on him.

"So we ain't plowin' no more!" I yells, triumphant.

He starts waving to his men. "Stop it! Stop this thing!"

There ain't much they can do, with their horses shying way out there.

Big boy grabs for his six-gun and runs alongside the tractor, and starts firing, crazy-like, at the iron giant.

I laugh at him. Laugh right out loud. Them bullets go ricocheting off, and some of them near go back out and hit him. If he keeps that up, he's going to have wounds that'll spoil his looks plenty.

HE DON'T like the laugh none. He's getting madder and madder. His shots get faster and faster.

Then I forget to laugh. One of the slugs hits the water hose. Water spurts out. Not bad leak yet. But it's emptying the boiler and lowering the head of steam.

His pretty face all screwed up with a mocking grin, Wate Boyd turns his gun on me. I remember he's good with them sixes and start ducking.

"Stop that thing!" he yells.

Well, being a man packing an engineer's license intsead of a gun, I can't argue. Two miles an hour on an engine ain't fast enough to dodge bullets. I jerk her out of gear.

"Get your hands up—all of you!" big boy calls. His spotted-vest chest is sticking out again, and he's watching the girl with the corner of his eye.

Then to his men, "Come tie 'em up!

They're goin' into hibernation till too late to plow for flax."

They take hold of Hank Judd first, back there on the plows. They all grab at him at once, and jerk him around and rough him up, getting his hands tied behind him. Then one is left to finish that job, and that makes three climbing up the ladder to the cab.

I give Jess a look, which he sends right back. The first man gets up there beside us, and starts reaching for my wrists. I dive right for his belt, and throw him between us and the gun. We slam together against the side.

Jess is taking the next one at the top of the ladder. Nearly pushes him off, too. But the hombre grabs his leg and sets him down hard and jumps on top of him.

But pretty-face bully with the gun sees it ain't doing him no good out there and comes over, spoiling to get in it himself. He shoves aside the last one on the ladder, and comes up in big leaps, snorting like a stallion.

He aims straight at me.

I'm doing pretty well with the fellow I have. I've got him rocking when Wate joins in.

The other fellow comes, too. Three's too many, slugging at you on a crowded platform, with Jess and his man wrestling underfoot.

Wate starts with a kick on the shins, then his fist smashes between my eyes. Things get foggy. I can't find nothing with my fists. with three of them all around me, I can't hit his solid flesh any direction.

They're driving me behind the steering wheel. They're grabbing at my wrists, thinking already of trussing me up that easy. They've got me, sure.

I press against something familiar. I forget the men. I turn a little, and my hand closes on the smooth, used iron. It's the gear lever. Wate smashes at me. But I just swing my weight back on that lever.

Gears clang together. The platform lurches under us. One of my assailants goes hurtling head first into the plowing, sticking there, upside down, kicking the air. Jess sends his customer rolling after. He grabs a leg of another of mine, and tries to send him along, but finds him a hard one.

That leaves me Wate Boyd. The big hulk is rocking with the motion of the tractor, teetering to get the feel of it under his feet. He bounces at me like a fighting rooster. As he flops a wing at me, I give that there gear lever a push. The engine stops dead under us. He plunks into me. I hook a heel behind an ankle and send him full-length against the front of the cab.

I grab that oil can and squeeze it, quick and hard. It spouts good. Shoots a stream of oil—right into that pretty olive face.

He let's out a yell, like he's hurt bad. Even a bullet couldn't hurt him worse. He feels for his silk handkerchief, and starts digging at his eyes, and swiping at his cheeks, until his face is a sticky mess.

He's through fighting. Quits me right there. Don't even know I'm around.

Loud and clear comes the girl's laugh. And she just keeps laughing. And laughing. The longer she laughs, the crazier he gets. Somehow fumbles his way across the platform and down that ladder, and heads for his horse.

One of his men rushes at him, trying to wipe the oil with his own neckerchief. But big boy just shoves him aside.

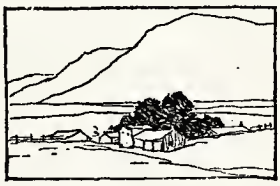
I give the safety a push, letting off a swoosh of steam. Pretty boy jumps, and yips again, and goes stampeding faster than before. Out there at his horse, he flops on and goes pounding over the skyline, never looking back.

The girl, still laughing, rides right up to me. "You're clever with that machine, aren't you?"

"Pretty clever," I admit.

Her eyelashes get long, sort of halfway hiding her eyes. "I like clever men. They're nice to go around with."

I said, "I like to get my plowin' done!" And slammed the gear in hard.



It Is Not Well to Challenge the Gods of the North

MEDICINE SMOKE

By JOHN BEAMES

"WELL, if that ain't old Jumpin' Weasel," exclaimed Vince Fulford, his cheerful face crinkling in pleased surprise. "Believe I'll go over and chew the rag with him awhile."

Hank Cross drew down the corners of his thick mouth sourly. "Be damned if I know why you want to talk to Nitchies," he growled.

"They're people, ain't they?" answered Vince. "Jumpin' Weasel's one of the finest old fellers I know, me and him's been pals for years."

"Vince is pals with every funny lookin' animal in the country," mocked Dinny Kilally, grinning and bobbing his red head.

He snapped his long bony fingers. "Go to it, then, but we ain't talkin' to no Nitchies."

Tod Hunt stared with his small, round, black eyes, and said in a tone of solemn disapproval, "I don't find myself synthetic with no Indians."

They went on, and Vince dropped down beside the white-headed, purblind old man, who squatted in his gray blanket in the sunshine outside his teepee.

Silently he passed over his tobacco pouch, and as silently Jumping Weasel took it and filled his pipe.

Vince lit it for him, then filled his own pipe, and they sat and smoked side by side without a word for some moments.

"You have been travelling?" said Jumping Weasel in his own tongue.

"Up and down," agreed Vince in the same language. "I did not find what I was looking for."

"White men are foolish. They work hard looking for a thing which has no value. Indians are much wiser."

"That is perhaps true. Gold is hard to find," admitted Vince.

They went on smoking. Vince found the calm dignity of the aged Indian restful. His own partners were always jangling and quarrelling, and he continually had to be the peacemaker.

Jumping Weasel began to tell a story, with infinite digressions, long pauses, baffling breaks in sequence, as all Indian stories are. Vince listened patiently, though sometimes having difficulty in understanding.

In brief, the old man said that when he was a boy, his band lived at the foot of an old medicine man who continually smoked his pipe. The grass was tall there and the caribou wonderfully fat.

One day a reckless hunter pursued a wounded caribou into forbidden ground. The caribou called to the medicine man for aid. The medicine man was angered with the hunter and began to puff hard on his pipe.

The smoke rose until it covered all the sky, and there came a great wind and hot rain fell. Ashes began to fall thicker and faster than snowflakes in a blizzard. Jumping Weasel's people were frightened, struck their teepees and fled. But the ashes followed them and killed many.

The first one to die was the hunter who had followed the wounded caribou into the sacred ground.

Vince nodded and said that was a wonderful story.

"Do you know why I told you that story?" asked Jumping Weasel. "It is because you have been my friend for a long time. I do not like white men, but you are a good white, almost as good as an Indian. But you are foolish, like all white men, and you go looking for gold. That is so?"

"That is so," admitted Vince.

"From the old medicine man's foot," continued Jumping Weasel, "there flows a stream and the sands of that stream are yellow. There are small pieces of metal that shine like the sun. If it does not make the old medicine man angry you may go and get that gold."

VINCE came out of his pleasant, dreamy state abruptly. "Where is this country? How far away?"

Jumping Weasel pointed. "Over there beyond the mountains. You will know the place because you will see the white head of the old medicine man and the smoke from his pipe."

"And how many days will it take to get there?"

Jumping Weasel spread out both hands and opened and closed them several times. "It is many smokes," he said. An Indian's knowledge of direction is accurate, but time and distance are concepts of no value to him. He cannot tell you how far away anything is.

"I am going to look for that gold," said Vince. "If I find it I will bring you a new pipe and much tobacco."

"And a hat," said Jumping Weasel. "A black hat."

"Yes, I will bring you a new black hat, too."

"Do not anger the old medicine man," said Jumping Weasel. "If his pipe goes puff-puff-puff very fast, come away. That means he is angry, and if you do not run away he will kill you."

"I'll remember that," said Vince, and rose.

He went to look for his partners.

"Bah," said Hank, "just damned old Nitchie fairy tales."

"Indians don't lie," answered Vince. "If the old lad says there's gold there, there is gold and lots of it."

"I wouldn't go to say he was prev-ri-catin'," said Tod. "There might be aurferious sands there."

"Sure, we'll take a chance," said Dinny, who was always anxious to try something new, and could never bear to stay long in one place.

"Well, Hank?" asked Vince.

Hank stuck out his ugly lower lip and replied between a sneer and a snarl, "It's a pity we'd be wastin' our time runnin' after every dizzy rumor."

"Don't you want to come along?" asked Vince with his gentle, tolerant smile.

"Oh, I guess I'll come," was the ungracious reply. Twenty years of seeking gold without finding any to speak of had permanently soured a disposition none too sweet to begin with.

THEY went north as far as they could find water to take them, then cached their canoe and pushed into the mountains on foot. There was still deep snow in the passes though it was June. Hank grumbled endlessly.

Tod began to weaken. "You know, Vince, I think this here deletarious," he said plaintively. "We don't know but what we're chasin' a ignum fatus."

Slugging through thigh-deep snow reduced Dinny's reckless buoyancy to the point where he too began to complain. "I don't mind takin' a chance, but I like it to be a fightin' chance, Vince. I believe that old damn Nitchie's lyin'."

Vince did not lose the patience that had kept the discordant quartette together for two years now. "Well, boys," he said, "we come this far, and I don't know this ground has ever been prospected. It'd be a pity if we turned back before we looked it over."

"Without we see something quick, I'm goin' back," swore Hank. "We was damn fools to come anyway."

It required all Vince's tact, persuasiveness, and quietly inflexible purpose to get them over the pass. They finally camped on the northern side in a little valley full of new grass. There Hank shot a caribou, and all of them cheered up over rich juicy steaks.

In these latitudes there is no night in summer. Vince pointed northward. "There's the old medicine man smokin' his pipe, boys," he said.

"That's a cloud," contradicted Hank promptly.

But Tod agreed with Vince. "It's most decisively smoke."

Dinny recovered his spirits at once. "Hurrah, bring on your river with the golden sand," he said. "Won't be long now."

They had to cross a ridge before they got a clear view of Medicine Man peak. It towered alone and impressive among small hills bare of snow, and greeted them with a low, deep growl, and a fan-shaped puff of smoke.

The central cone was dormant, a fleckless white against the tender blue of the arctic sky, but from a vent low down on one flank thick vapor jetted at irregular intervals. Jumping Weasel's description was accurate; the resemblance to a white-headed old man hunched over his pipe was remarkable.

They went down into luxuriant grasses waist-high, and a herd of fat caribou stared at them wide-eyed. The bulls swung their heads and snorted, taking short threatening steps in their direction.

"Tame as beef cattle," said Vince. "Easy to see they never was hunted."

"Leave me get a shot at 'em," cried Dinny, reaching for his rifle.

"Why scare 'em?" asked Vince, pushing the weapon down. "We got all the meat we want for now. Don't bother 'em and they'll be there when we need 'em."

"Quit bein' a damn fool, we're in a hurry," snapped Hank.

"Sure and I wonder how you can bear to live with yourself at all," rejoined Dinny, but slid his rifle back in its case.

They had never seen such pastures. Early in the season though it was, they had difficulty in forcing a way through the matted growth. There were luxuriant willow thickets too in a latitude where willows are usually small sticks clinging close to the ground.

They came upon a stream from which a light mist rose. Hank's pan was in his hand in a moment, and he bent and plunged it into the water. He snatched it back with a startled yell.

"Hell, it's boilin'," he roared.

Dinny nearly rolled on the ground with laughter, and Hank cursed him, sucking a scalded thumb.

Tod blinked. "This here's a funny phenomenon," he remarked very seriously.

Vince got out his pan. "We'll see anyway if there's any gold in her."

WORKING with caution, he managed to scoop up a little dirt from the creek bed. The others followed his example but were not rewarded by even a color.

"A gyp," grumbled Hank. "Come all this way just to get my hands scalded."

"There'll be other creeks," said Vince. "We'll try 'em all."

They went on toward the Medicine Man and the aspect of the landscape altered. Growth disappeared, and the soil assumed a sickly color. Dinny remarked that his feet were burning, and bent to touch the ground with his fingers.

"Sure, and it's like a hot stove lid," he said. "Let we be gettin' out of here."

Little curls of sulphurous smoke issued from the ground, and Hank was seized with a violent fit of coughing. "Hate this damn stink," he sputtered. "You and your damned Nitchies."

"I didn't come all this way to be stufficated," complained Tod.

"Not liable to find anything here," said Vince. "We'll work around the other side the mountain."

They retreated from the hot ground, passing several hot springs, rimmed with brilliant yellow and red. Several times the ground quivered under their feet as if some giant blacksmith beat upon a mighty anvil in an underground cavern.

Sometimes they were beset by hot, foul vapors that made them all cough. They were filled with a raging thirst, but all the water they sampled was either boiling or so mineralized as to be undrinkable.

Hank's temper worsened steadily. He cursed Jumping Weasel and the Medicine

Man, Vince, Dinny and even the harmless Tod.

A sudden shock almost threw them off their feet and they saw the ground open before them with a deep sigh, exhale a breath of choking gas and close again. Then there was a thunderous crash, and they turned to see a club-shaped column of black smoke shoot skyward from the Medicine Man's pipe and slowly mushroom out.

"Lemme out of here," gasped Hank. "We're dead men. The whole works is goin' to blow up."

They ran as fast as their heavy packs would permit, while fine gray ash sifted down and coated the soil with a sort of dandruff. They did not halt until they had reached a little hill beyond range of the ash. The shocks and rumblings had ceased and the pall of smoke was shredding out and drifting away. The eruption was over for the time being.

Vince looked at the mountain and grinned. "You sure threw a scare into us, old-timer. But if there's gold around here we're going to find it, and you can snort and bellyache all you please."

"Ain't you had enough yet?" inquired Hank. "Damn little sense you got. To hell with gold, what I want is water."

THEY found an unpolluted spring in the valley beyond, and slaked their thirst. Diligent panning, however, revealed no gold.

All were very weary by now, and so camped. The Medicine Man's shoulder was between them and his pipe, but they could see a red glow reflected on the under side of the smoke cloud that hung over his head.

Before striking camp next morning they had a lengthy argument. Hank wanted to return at once, and Tod gave it at his opinion that the situation was "pergressively deterioratin'." Dinny was reluctant to give up but frightened of an eruption.

"Look," said Vince, "we come a long ways and we'd look foolish goin' back without makin' a real try. We'll work around this side of the mountain so if the place on the other side does blow up we'll be protected to some extent. Give us a better chance to get away. I tell you, boys, I'm not quittin' until I panned every creek on this side."

THEY trailed reluctantly after him. The country on this slope of the Medicine Man was green, with many caribou grazing peacefully. The water they found was cool and only slightly mineralized, but assiduous panning produced no gold.

They came in early afternoon to a creek several feet wide. "If there's gold anywheres around here," said Vince, "that's where you'll find her."

"Hell, I ain't goin' to waste my time," snarled Hank.

But Dinny squatted to the water and dipped his pan. He gave it a whirl so that the water fanned out over the edge. Suddenly he let out a yell, "Lookit, lookit, lookit," and held up a gold nugget the size of a walnut.

"I didn't think old Jumpin' Weasel would lie to me," said Vince with deep satisfaction.

The others had shed their packs in an instant and were scooping up dirt in their pans. He followed their example. With steady flicks of the wrist they got rid of the soft muck. When they got down to the heavier dirt they refilled their pans with clean water.

At the end of the second washing there were glints of yellow to be seen in all the pans. Then the final washing, done with infinite care, their eyes started from their heads. Each pan bottom was studded with flakes and specks of gold. It was almost unbelievable, in the class of the fairy tales old Klondykers tell to incredulous listeners.

"A milyun dollars," gasped Dinny. "Increbidle wealth," murmured Tod dreamily, increbidle." "I struck it at last," cried Hank with the first note of exultation anyone had ever heard in his voice. "Good old Jumpin' Weasel," said Vince. "I'll buy him everythin' in the store."

The Medicine Man, angry and jealous, answered them with a long and menacing roll of drums.

"Let's stake our claims," said Hank. "It's every man for himself from now on."

"I thought we was partners," said Vince. "Some of us mightn't get as much as the rest. It'd be fairer if we pooled our makin's."

"Every man for himself," insisted Hank greedily.

"This here's my claim," said Dinny. "I panned her first. What you fellers got there

is my gold. You leave it here and go stake your own claims."

"You hog," snarled Hank.

"No," said Vince. "If it's every man for himself, Dinny's right. Here you are, old-timer, and hope you get plenty more." He emptied his pan into Dinny's. "Now, who's goin' to stake where?"

"I'll take the next below him," put in Hank at once.

"Me for the next precedin'," said Tod hastily.

"I think I'll stake up creek," said Vince.

"Do you know somethin' you ain't told us?" inquired Hank with lowering brows, and they all looked at him suspiciously.

"No, how would I? I just thought I'd take a chance up creek."

"I'll trade with you," said Hank instantly.

"Why? You get what you asked for, I'm satisfied with what I'm takin'."

"You're holdin' somethin' out on us," accused Hank.

"Oh, have it your own way," said Vince wearily. "Anythin' at all for peace. I'll trade with any one of you if that'll satisfy you. There'll be plenty for all of us. Come on, let's quit janglin' and stake our claims, I don't like the look of that old Medicine Man."

THE volcano frowned down on them and belched a cloud of inky smoke into the sky.

After a few moments of indecision, Dinny set his discovery post, and they measured their claims both ways from that. At the last moment, Tod decided to stake upstream from Hank, and so the claims eventually ran, Vince, Dinny, Hank, Tod.

Now they all set feverishly to work, heedless of the warning rumbles and angry puffing of the Medicine Man's pipe. There was no lumber for sluice boxes and the washing had to be done a panful at a time. With aching backs and cricked necks, plastered with mud and wet to the skin, they labored on without thought of food or rest.

In their eagerness they hardly bothered with the fine dust but stuffed their pokes with nuggets the size of peas. Vince picked out one the size of a baby's hand and another as big as a pigeon's egg.

He did not stop work to tell the others, though he began to suspect, as was the case, that he had the richest of the four claims. A small ledge of rock acted as a natural riffle and the basin above it was one auriferous mass. At this one spot he worked systematically.

Dinny was perpetually running up and down his stretch of the creek, plunging his pan in now here now there, in hopes of striking a richer pocket.

Hank worked like a lunatic but with a lack of system that made much of his labor waste motion. He was a big man and clumsy, and bending over gave him such a backache that he groaned aloud at intervals. But he toiled doggedly on.

Tod burrowed like a badger, never resting, never lifting his eyes from his pan.

IT WAS Vince who decided to knock off work. He straightened his aching back and looked up to see the sun on the northern horizon. "Must be near midnight," he said. "I better get the boys to quit or they won't be able to work tomorrow."

He gathered dry willow sticks, made a fire and put the billy on to boil. In answer to his shouts the others came trailing in, hungry and exhausted.

Yet even Hank was in good spirits. He grinned, showing tobacco-stained teeth, and his savage little eyes were like sparks under his bushy brows. Dinny, for all his weariness, babbled happily, and Tod sat with half-closed eyes, a little smirk on his round face.

The Medicine Man threatened them in a low angry growl, and a plume of black smoke boiled off downwind, a glowing red on its underside.

They fell asleep before they had finished eating, and were undisturbed even by several sharp earthquake shocks.

Vince woke to find the sun shining wanly through a thick haze. He prepared breakfast and roused the others.

He nodded at the Medicine Man. "I don't like the old feller's looks," he said. "He's actin' pretty ugly if you ask me. I'd say we'd best not stick around any longer'n we have to."

"Well, you're a hell of a guy," said Hank contemptuously. "Ain't you the one brung us here? You was doin' all the squallin' and beefin' only yesterday so we wouldn't turn around and go back. Now,

when we do strike it rich, you get cold feet. I ain't goin' away from here, not yet I ain't."

"What do we care for a little smoke and noise," boasted Dinny. "That old bird can't scare us. I'm stayin' right here till my poke's that heavy it takes both hands to heft her, and the stuff's right there on my claim."

"I don't anticipate no trouble," said Tod. "It ain't goin' to be so catastrophic as what it looks, and with the prospects before me of luxuriant retiring for the rest of my days, I'd be foolish to be too precipitous about quittin'."

"You must be worked up," said Vince with a smile. "Don't think I ever heard you talk so much before."

Tod's little smirk widened. "There's a flood in the tides of man that took the right way leads to fortune," he misquoted.

They returned to work. Light earthquake shocks were frequent and fine ash showered down on them at intervals. The cloud of smoke over the Medicine Man's head was thicker.

VINCE looking up, nodded and smiled. "I know you don't want us here, old feller, but just leave us be for a few days and we'll be on our way."

But his partners violently resisted any suggestion that they leave. Hank was least changed. His temper was perhaps a little better, but he was sullen and stubborn. Dinny lost his gay irresponsibility; he no longer laughed or shouted; when not at work he was the victim of a nervous twitching and his eyes burned feverishly. Lean to begin with, he lost weight rapidly.

The greatest change was in Tod; from a mild, placid, dreamy word-mangler, he had become a self-centered mass of avarice, intent only on adding to the hoard in his bulging poke.

Vince was not aware of much change in himself. It was pleasant to heft his poke and know that it spelt release from poverty. He was glad too that he had been able to bring good fortune to his partners. But he was not blind to the circumstances. There was deadly peril in that pall of smoke that lowered over his head, and he felt a sense of responsibility for the safety of the party. He had brought them there and he must see that they got away before disaster fell.

THEY, however, grew more contemptuous of their danger with every passing day. They hardly noticed the ominous signs around them.

"Just only smoke and noise. Don't mean a thing," said Dinny. "A feller's as safe here as home in bed."

"No yaller streak in me," bragged Hank. "Some guys got no guts."

Tod's smirk had become fixed. "My courage is equal to small uproars of nature, and I don't claim to be indomitless at that," he said primly.

There came a night when the volcano was ominously quiet. The air was windless and extraordinarily hot and close for Arctic latitudes. A flat black cloud rested low over the Medicine Man's head. The four were wakened at dawn by a single heavy explosion, followed by a running series of lesser reports. They rose to find the whole sky overcast and a steady rain of ash drifting down.

"I'm gettin' out of here," said Vince abruptly. "I'd sooner take what I got and be alive than get a little more and be dead. Coming, boys?"

"To hell with you," replied Hank. "Look, for twenty years I been starvin' and freezin' in this damn country. This is the first time I make more than a grubstake. I'm stayin'."

"But you can come back."

"Maybe I could, maybe not. If that there blows up, who knows whether there'll be any creek to come back to. It might be snowed under with these here ashes or something. Maybe we couldn't never find it again. I'm takin' the chance, though I don't think there's much to be scared of. I'll get out before anythin' happens, but I ain't

askin' no man with a yaller streak to stay."

"We'll get lots of warnin'," said Dinny. "It ain't no worse than it has been all along. I don't know why you'd get cold feet."

"I ain't p'ram'ulatin' out of here neither," agreed Tod, his little black eyes fixed and greedy.

"I'm sorry I brought you," said Vince. "It's my fault and I feel to blame for it. I want you safe out of here."

"Well, take your warnin's and some grub and get to hell," said Hank. "We don't blame you for bringin' us here, and we won't blame you if we get it in the neck, but we're here to make us some money, and no damn volcano can bluff us out."

Vince began to make up his pack, taking a moderate share of their food, worked his arms into the straps and stood up. "Boys," he said in a final plea, "won't you listen to me?"

"No, go on about your business," roared Hank. "We don't want no yaller bellies around here."

"Too bad you're yaller," said Dinny, "but we got no time to waste. We'll get out all right when the time comes."

Tod shook his head. "I always thought you was more fortudinous," he said, and set off after the others.

Vince stood looking after them, feeling sick and ashamed. Would it not be better to stop and see it through with them? But he could do nothing to help them if he did. They were insane with greed or they would see that this day was different from any that had gone before.

He turned and began to plod slowly away. He had gone perhaps half a mile when ash began to fall heavily, followed at once by a furious gust of sultry air.

He halted. "I brung 'em here," he said half aloud. "I got to get 'em out if I have to hold a gun on 'em. They're crazy men, they ain't responsible for what they're doin'."

He retraced his steps. He was going toward the volcano, but it was completely hidden from view. The air was filled with a continuous roar, punctuated by terrific crashes, and a flickering red light came and went through the dusk as though the gates of hell opened and shut at intervals. Volcanic bombs began to fall around him, stones as big as his fist.

Still he kept on. He reached the creek, flowing turbid and thick with volcanic ash, and followed it upward, shouting now and then, though his voice was drowned by the uproar around. Foul smelling vapors eddied around him, causing him to cough and choke. Vision was limited to a few yards.

A dim figure, hatless, wide-mouthed and gasping, plunged out of the smother. Vince ran and caught him. "Hank, Hank, you're headed the wrong way. This way," he begged.

But Hank broke away, muttering insanely, and dashed headlong toward the volcano. He was hidden in an instant.

There came such an explosion as Vince had never heard in his life. It was not so much a sound as a blow that flung him face downward on the ground.

He rolled over and saw the whole sky aflame. He struggled up and there began to fall around him great masses of rock. He began to run, and came suddenly upon Dinny, standing with hands hanging, a dazed expression on his face. Then a huge boulder, falling from an incredible height, crashed down upon him and blotted him from the earth.

Dazed, wheezing like a broken-winded horse, deaf, all but blind, Vince fled. He crested a ridge swept clear of smoke and dust by a wind of hurricane violence, saw light again and breathed sweet pure air. There he fell down and lay like a dead man, while the great eruption wore itself out in a series of decreasing explosions.

Hours later he was able to sit up, rub his smarting eyes and gaze about him. Where the white peak of the Medicine Man's head had soared to the skies now lay a low-hanging cloud lit by occasional flashes. The eruption had blown the entire cone to fragments.

From the shattered, headless trunk there poured a stream of glowing lava. The creek of the golden sands was gone, vanished in steam, and down its bed there crept a fiery serpent. Of Hank, of Dinny, of Tod there was no sign.

WHITE-HEADED, purblind Jumping Weasel sat huddled in his gray blanket at the door of his teepee.

A haggard-looking white man came to him and offered a brand new pipe, a packet of tobacco, and a new black hat.

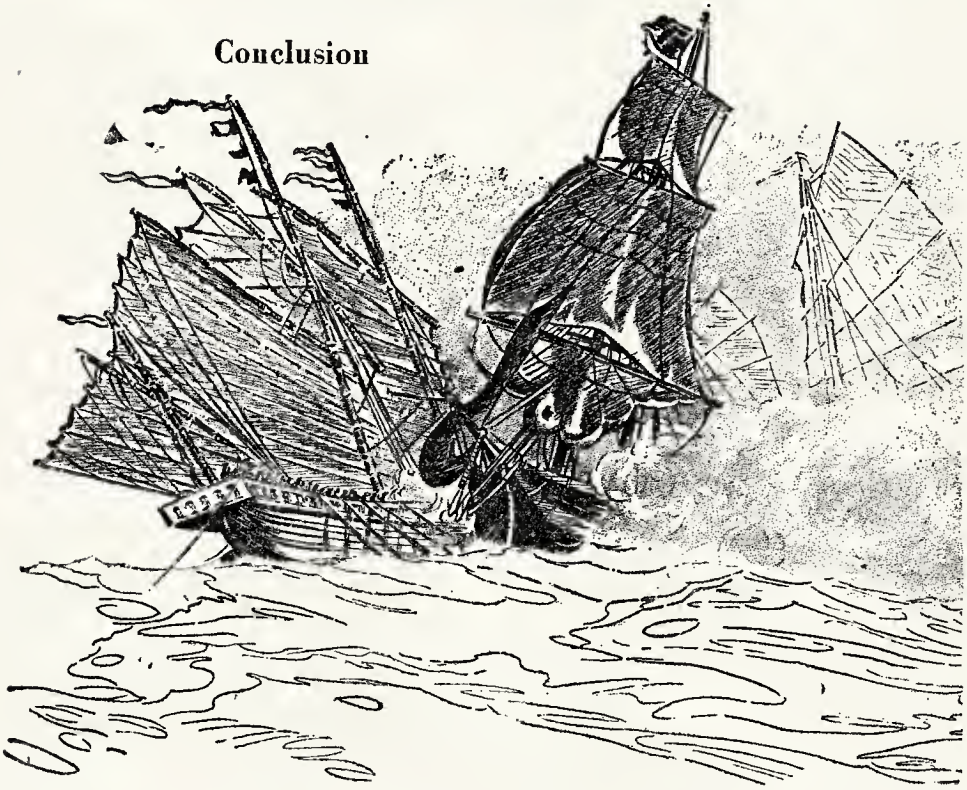
Said Jumping Weasel, "See what you had to survive to bring them to me. Whites are foolish men."

"Perhaps they are," admitted Vince.

China Clipper

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Conclusion



XXIII

THE escort of soldiers and boatmen which had brought Garner to Macao were not a bit impressed by his demand for immediate departure; he was unable to convince them that Commissioner Lin was in a hurry to see the *China Queen's* papers. Their chief said, with a thousand courtesies, "If the Honorable Lin had been impatient, he would have sent you by 'fire-express'."

Garner explained that it would hardly have been practicable to ship him and his companions by relays of horsemen covering two hundred English miles a day.

"There is also post-haste express," was the bland retort. "Which he did not use."

This was a courier system which was required to cover only one hundred and thirty-three miles a day.

"We can't ride at that clip," Garner protested, "or he would have. We're a lot heavier than letters, we couldn't be hauled."

Instead of answering, the chief of the escort joined his men in drinking tea, and later, smoking a few pipes of poppy juice. Dom Manuel shook his head and smiled. "It is no use. They have not cut our throats, and they do not let someone else cut them."

After looking at those faces, Garner would have been skeptical, except for past performance of the crew. "Still and all," he grumbled, "I doubt they'd defend us to the last man! It's a wonder you're not kicking about having to go back to Canton."

"Could bribe guards to say pirates killed me in fighting for *China Queen,*" Dom Manuel admitted.

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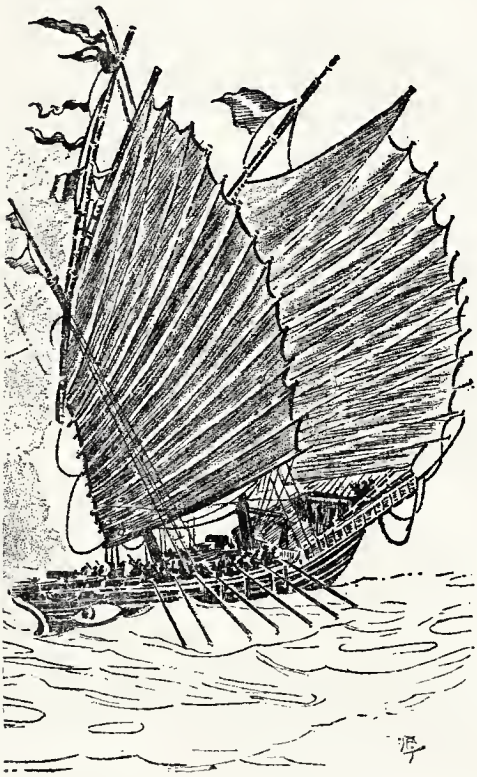

Ah Sam agreed that such would be entirely feasible. Garner asked, "Why don't you? Lin is still sore because the British haven't surrendered one of that party of five sailors who killed a Chinaman in that Hong Kong brawl, he's tried to be reasonable, he's tried to tell them that he knows they can't ever find out which one is guilty, so he'll settle for just any sailor at all. Or even a landlubber. You're crazy, going back into trouble."

"Yes, Commissioner Lin is a very reasonable man. Too reasonable to chop off my head instead of a sailor's. He does not even chop off British factor's head. Not even yours. So, not necessary I leave you."

"You might see Antonia," Garner persisted, for he still felt that there was no sense in Manuel's returning to a trap from which one could emerge only through Lin's good will.

"I send her a note. That is why I must go with you. What is called sporting, you understand?"

"Damn if I do!"

"Is this way. At first, I think the American has no family pride, nice fellow, only no honor about the women. Now, maybe I am wrong, maybe your way is better."

"Oh, so it's devil take your family and Antonia's muddy reputation that you smeared up yourself?"

Dom Manuel bunched his fingertips, kissed them, rolled his eyes. "Yes! And what you think? When the *China Queen* goes to America, I go too, with Antonia. Some Americans I think maybe we like them. Is better than have my Antonia go in a convent." A pause, and he expanded his revelation. "My family, *Jesús Cristo,* they get sore, but I do not care, in America, is better starting new family as living with old one, no?"

Garner made an elaborate bow. "All this is from my example and argument, eh?"

"Yes. You are my friend."

"And I'm yours. So I say, get out of this."

"No. I must earn the trip. Not the cash, but for the good idea, you understand?"

"All right, yes, I understand idiots perfectly."

Dom Manuel bowed. "Sure, you are one. You yell, then you stay to fight because you love your ship, you scare us crazy, when is easy to jump over with the papers."

IT WAS not until dawn that the crew shoved off in a long, slim boat shaped like that which Twelfth Brother had pushed alongside the *China Queen,* but much larger. She carried twenty sweeps of a side, and her speed amazed Garner. Some time elapsed before accumulated impatience dissolved sufficiently to let him look back, toward the clipper, instead of northward.

At his exclamation, Dom Manuel demanded, "What is it now? Something bad again?"

"She's making sail. Why, the dirty—!"

Wrath, perplexity, and apprehension choked him.

Dom Manuel finally got his chance for

a bright guess: "Maybe he is scare to meet Mr. Hale and the young lady. So, he has one more good idea, with that Captain Butler. Sailing and trading for himself, she is a nice new ship."

Facing the outcome of his venture into opium might drive Joab Erskine to piracy. Too late, it occurred to Garner that he had told the skipper more than he should have. Amos Butler was no companion for a proud and daring man who brooded over the danger into which he had put the woman he loved, and from which he saw no chance to extricate her. That Garner, winning Lin's tentative confidence, had taken the wind out of Erskine's sails made it just that much worse.

After studying his sombre face, Manuel said, "She is one fine ship, but some day, they build nicer one, bigger and faster."

"She's got four twelve-pounders. It's just too handy at the wrong time. This's a sure way of killing her!"

Hale would quit jeering at astrology, Garner told himself, as he craned his neck to keep the *China Queen* in view as long as he could. He hoped Hale would live long enough to get the news.

As Lintin Island came abeam, he saw the seventy-four gun *Hyacinth* standing up the river. A line of war junks menaced her. The boat's crew stepped up their beat, as though to get clear of stray shot. When the *Hyacinth* veered, made for the line instead of offering them her broadside, Garner held his breath. Hostilities now, and there would be the devil to pay!

Dom Manuel said, "These men, they still take us to Lin."

"We win a few hours that way, that's all."

A black flag went to the *Hyacinth's* masthead. Garner groaned.

But the junks did not open fire. Neither did the British; but after their defiance, and a maneuver by which they could have raked the junks from stem to stern, firing port and starboard broadsides, the *Hyacinth* stood upstream again.

"More important thing somewhere else," the Portuguese optimist suggested.

Twenty miles to the Tiger's Mouth. The chanting Chinese drove on at a clipper pace. The captain broke out jingals and rockets and a few "stinkpots," earthenware bombs with time fuses. This didn't reassure Garner. Lin's boatmen, seeing the *Hyacinth,* expected trouble at the river mouth, where the approach to Canton was only two miles wide, and guarded by forts at Chuen Pi to the east, and at Tai Kok Tau on the opposite side.

There could well have been a fire raft attack that night at Kap Sing Mun, far from the *China Queen's* berth, unseen from Macao because of distance and the intervening three thousand foot heights of Lantao Island. Anything could have happened during or after her defense off the Praya.

River traffic was far less than the blockade permitted; neither fishing nor manure boats were plying along the shore. The more he read the signs, the less Garner liked it.

Then he heard a rumbling, deep, sullen, and prolonged as though prodigious kettledrums rolled. A pause, a thundering of different pitch and not so regular. Lookouts in the prow began to yell and point at rising smoke.

THEREAFTER, the picture developed all too fast. Imperial junks stood to three British men o' war. The latter fired broadsides until heavy clouds enveloped them to the main yards. Fire rafts shoved off from Chuen-Pi Point. The guns of the fort were blasting. Shot, falling short or over, skated along the water like rocks skipped by boys at play. Sometimes they swooped high, and plopped down, raising tall jets of water.

The matting sails of a junk were ablaze. Shells burst, chewing up rigging, knocking spars to pieces. But the Chinese stood to their guns. As junks fell out of line, smoking and crippled, the others closed in.

"Admiral Wang," Ah Sam said, recognizing a triangular pennon. "He closes in, he be-circles them."

Rockets tore red streaks through the dense clouds that began to envelope the entire battle. The guns of Tai Kok Tau were silent. Evidently the imperial junks were so close to the enemy that they masked their own land batteries.

The oarsmen kept up the beat. Those at the prow gave a deafening account of all that they could see, and a good deal more. Garner grimaced and spat. However the battle had started, whether by Chinese

provocation or hair-trigger British response to a bluff, good men on both sides were being blown galley-west because of the East India Company's opium. He thought of this, rather than begin thinking of Lin's fury when the news reached him in Canton.

Flame mushroomed from the veiling smoke. Ah Sam said, a moment later, "One junk blow all to hell."

A magazine had let go.

Far off, Garner saw surviving seamen bobbing about in the water. The skipper, however, did not swerve to pick up dazed countrymen who clung to wreckage, or swam without any sense of direction. Prudently, he veered west, to get away from stray shells, and to the shelter of Tai Kok Tau Island. He was going to skirt the shore until the passage turned back into the Pearl River. It wasn't his battle. No foreign devil had shelled him, and he wouldn't even need his jingals and stinkpots. . . .

His job, once he shoved off, was to outspeed other boats in a measure corresponding to a "fire-express" outracing ordinary couriers; and, despite his detour to keep clear of battle, that was precisely what he was doing.

When the boat finally nosed into the main channel, Garner saw the *Hyacinth* standing upstream. The imperial junks, he reasoned, had been shot to pieces, as the only odds in their favor had been their number. Since heavy guns still rumbled, the other British ships must be fighting it out with the forts at Chuen Pi.

Some of Her Majesty's ships had come from India, bringing soldiers, Twelfth Brother had told him. Despite his not being able to hear the crackle of musketry, it was very likely that redcoats and turbanned Sikhs were landing, under cover of naval guns, to take Chuen Pi by assault.

This was the war which Lin, whether bluffing or not, had promised. And the *Hyacinth* was making for Canton to protect the factories of the Shameen, to shell the city as a counter-threat.

Twenty sweeps on a side made more way than the *Hyacinth,* who was repairing rigging as she stood upstream.

"We'll get there ahead of the shooting," Garner said to Dom Manuel.

"Unless some warship is already up the river before this fight break out. What you must worry on is the question, is it couriers riding to tell Commissioner Lin he has the war?"

Garner jerked as though stabbed.

Dom Manuel added, brightly, "That Admiral Wang, he does not have post riders." Then, "But maybe the fort have some, no?"

XXIV

WHEN Garner landed at the quai of Canton's Nam Kwan suburb, he was grateful for Lin's guards. Shopkeepers were putting up their heavy shutters. Rumor-crazed families were moving out, some pushing wheelbarrows, others carrying their belongings suspended from shoulder-yokes.

Wild-eyed loafers, beggars, opium addicts prowled, ready to pounce on the overloaded, or to snatch whatever dropped from a cargo of goods. *"Fan kwei! Fan kwei!"* they yelled, and riot ripened.

News of clashes downstream seemed not yet to have come to Canton. Rather, the town had known that there would be attacks against foreign ships, and so was itching for loot. Peaceable citizens knew that it was time to clear out, or else barricade their doors.

The further Garner went into the walled city, the more he wondered how much Governor Tang knew concerning Fu's disastrous adventure. The factories, he told himself, could with reasonable luck hold out until the *Hyacinth* came to protect them with her guns.

Couriers racing from the Lin's *yamen* made him fear the worst. Companies of soldiers marched down the avenue leading from the Ching Pih Gate. And this time, the Commissioner reduced both delay and ceremony to the minimum when he received his returned guests.

The unnatural intensity of Lin's eyes belied the calmness of his face. The hand which held his fan twitched perceptibly. Yet he sat there, listening as though he had nothing else to do. When his secretary would have taken the exhibits which Garner offered, Lin himself reached for them.

Deliberately, daintily, he plucked at the blood-stained coat and button-topped cap. He carefully examined the sword. This was

after he handed the ship's papers to his interpreter.

"These things," he said, finally, "look familiar. Yet they do not prove that Fu Wha Cheng himself wore them."

"I recognized Fu Wha Cheng. I had seen him twice before. Each time was one to be remembered."

"Who shot the late Honorable Fu?"

Garner looked him in the eye. "According to Chinese law, Captain Erskine is responsible. He was present and directing the defense."

Lin smiled appreciatively, but without pleasure. "Unlike many foreigners, you learn."

Garner bowed. "Thank you, Your Excellency."

The secretary stood respectfully in front and to one side of the commissioner. He had taken off his silver-rimmed glasses, and politely concealed his hands in his long sleeves. He kept his eyes decorously fixed on the third button of the master's gray tunic. Lin, noting this, asked questions. Finally he said to Garner, "The log and the papers agree with your story. You were logged for striking your superior, and at the time you stated. I can therefore not doubt your honesty in telling me that Fu Wha Cheng raided the *China Queen*. You may withdraw, Mr. Garner, with your friend and your interpreter."

"But the Governor's prisoners—when he hears what's happened to Fu Wha Cheng—"

Lin smiled blandly. "He will be perturbed. Forgive me for interrupting you so rudely."

"But—just a moment—"

Lin remained standing in front of his chair. "My men have already told me of the battle at Chuen Pi, and of warships hurrying up the river. This requires my attention."

"But—Governor Tang—he'll murder them!"

"This emergency also requires Governor Tang's attention. I shall do my best to protect the Hales."

Lin bowed. Garner knew that no amount of shouting or pleading would gain another moment, so he stood there, watching the commissioner leave. Lin's steward stepped up to show the guests to their quarters. Ah Sam spoke a few words to him, and then said to Garner, "Commissioner Lin keeps you here for protection. There is no other safe place for foreigners."

The increasing uproar of the city confirmed that statement. There was no place to go. Lin needed no guards to detain his guests. Dom Manuel said, as they went down a passageway toward their old quarters, "I think he mean well, being worried not knowing what to do, not wanting to make promise."

THERE was nothing to be done except trust Lin's good will and bigoted virtue. After all, British and not American warships had bombarded Chuen Pi. But now that hostilities had started, Garner doubted that Lin, however convinced of Tang's violation of the imperial edict, could afford to depose him, or offend him by demanding the release of the Hales.

"Stalemate," he told Dom Manuel, some time later, as they went into the garden, and without interference from *yamen* servants. "Leaving won't hurt, and staying won't gain anything."

"Where go?"

Garner pulled a long face. "You're right. Probably a nasty mob around the factories."

From where they sat, they could see couriers entering and leaving. Visitors came to the *yamen,* some in palanquins, others in sedan chairs. Garner eyed his companions. Manuel, short, bronzed, and black-haired would not be conspicuous if he kept moving.

"If men o' war come up to shell the town, we'd have somewhere to go," he finally told Manuel and Ah Sam. "And with landing parties to protect the factories, that'd be our chance to get soldiers to turn Tang's *yamen* inside out. You two could carry me in a chair—" He pointed at those parked in the outer court. "Ah Sam in front, you in back, with your head down."

It was the far off rumble of thunder which had set him thinking. In a storm, they could leave as he had proposed. Then, from the north, came the roar of artillery. The forts on the heights above Canton were opening up. There was answering fire from the south. Shells passing over the city made a sound between that of a train passing over

a bridge, and gale howling down a chimney. Musketry rattled in the eastern quarter. The volleys had scarcely ceased echoing when the crash and a hammering of small arms came from west of the walled city.

The sky had suddenly become overcast. A cold wind whipped into the court and stirred up dust. Powder stench tainted the air. Some of the coolies dashed for cover when a shell, dropping far short of its mark, burst well inside the northern wall of the city. Others yelled and made for the gate, abandoning the masters they had carried to Lin's place.

Rain drummed on the tiles, a cold, pelting rain.

"Let's go, this is it!"

The rain slashed Garner's face, and knifed through his clothes. He stamped through pools that had quickly formed in the court. Between thunder, cannons, and ripping volleys of musketry, no one paid attention to the three who hunched their shoulders up about their ears and faced the driving drops. Everything looked alike in the downpour.

Garner, however, could hardly believe his success when he ducked into a gilded chair, and his companions picked it up.

Splashing, slipping, stumbling, they made their way down streets jammed by howling refugees. Behind these came Chinese soldiers, shouting for gangway. Ah Sam swerved into an alley. He slipped and fell. Garner spilled into the mud. Lin's three guests barely managed to drag the sedan chair clear of the frantic civilians.

"To hell with this," Garner sputtered. "We'll all carry it, we all look alike now."

THE soldiers were throwing away their flintlock and matchlock muskets. Pelting rain made them useless. An exploding shell kicked up a geyser of tile and timber. For a moment its ruddy flare brightened the half-darkness.

Elsewhere, small arms crackled steadily. Percussion lock guns weren't hampered by the downpour. Everything favored the landing party. The defenders were retreating to the forts north of town to hold until the weather cleared. That foreign devils could fight in a cloudburst violated all laws of nature.

A volley raked the street. Several of the retreating troops dropped. Others scattered. When Garner got his first sight of the landing party, he stepped into view to hail them. Their leader pointed with his sword, and shouted. Two of the advancing files fired; the bullets spattered him with stucco.

Dom Manuel said, "Look, big men with beards, soldiers from India—Sikhs—"

"I'd barely squinted enough rain out of my eyes to make out the turbans when they cut loose," Garner grumbled, "we can't talk to those chaps!"

THE khaki-clad Sikhs were merely careful, ready to shoot or bayonet at the first abrupt move. Before they were abreast of the alley, Garner had taken a hand with the sedan chair, instead of riding. Dodging the Sikhs was more urgent than avoiding recognition as foreign devils.

After a few blocks, he recognized landmarks.

"Wait!" he croaked. "We're near Tang's *yamen.*"

Stray bullets, apparently from the Sai Kwan Quarter, buzzed and droned over the city wall, to *spat* against the tiles of near-by roofs.

They halted. Garner continued, "Stay clear of the landing parties, and we can barge right into the *yamen,* the place'll be a madhouse, we'll have the run of it."

While they debated the chances, a brisk exchange of fire developed, some blocks north: determined resistance by Chinese soldiers who had taken cover in time to keep their guns dry.

Yelling indicated hand to hand engagements as the invaders closed in.

Shells began to plaster the stubborn defenders. Apparently the Sikhs had sent out scouts, and then runners to carry word back to the ships, to designate the targets.

"Maybe Tang's holding the *yamen,*" Garner said. "Keep under cover, I'm going to see."

Instead, Ah Sam and Manuel jettisoned the sedan chair, and raced after him. Assuming that Syria and her father were still in the *yamen,* whatever was to be done had to be done in a hurry. If they weren't blown to pieces by naval guns, they'd fare as badly at the hands of looters waiting to raid the *yamen.*

XXV

THE city walls, the narrow alleys, the courts behind courts in every house played crazy tricks with sound. The skirmish, rapidly growing into a small battle, was like quicksilver; however many obstacles broke the lines, fragments pulled together, and leaked on.

Twice they came under fire from snipers. Once the Sikhs cut loose a volley at the three who darted from alley mouth and through pelting rain to win cover again. Luckily, Lin's men had not searched the "guests" when they returned from the *China Queen,* and thus all three had Colts, though it was an open question whether Ah Sam would damage himself or the enemy, if he had to use his weapon.

Finally they came in sight of the *yamen.* Looters were pouring into and out of the place, despite stray bullets which zinged and smacked across the plaza in front. Rockets with explosive heads were directed at the attackers, who retaliated with grenades. The flare of heavy shells brightened the late afternoon gloom. One falling short, stunned Garner as though he'd been clubbed.

Mud and plaster blinded him. Manuel clawed at his face, and stared at his bloody hand. Ah Sam squatted near-by, grinning and fingering his revolver. The looters broke in panic. Some dropped from running afoul of the volleys that now raked the open space, for the combatants had shifted again in their deadly hide and seek.

A blast shook the *yamen.* Falling timber and carved cornices twisted in the air, and showered the roofs in all directions. A section of wall had crumbled. Smoke billowed out, dense and choking. The breath of burning wood, and storerooms packed with goods blended with the powder fumes. Rain or no, there'd be a blaze working from passage to passageway, whipped by wind and by drafts.

Garner yelled, a choked cry, and got up. "That way, through there!"

Dom Manuel tackled him. "No, look!"

A party of Chinese had broken cover to counter-attack. Somewhere—Garner couldn't figure where—they had spotted a party of Sikhs. Whether this was to be a head-on clash, or a turning movement, he never found out. Before Manuel could drag him back to cover, a well-primed musket blazed. Manuel groaned, jerked from the impact. His collapse pulled Garner down.

They hustled Manuel back into the alley. Garner drew his Colt. This was none of his show, but Chinese or Sikh, they'd get six quick and accurate ones if they insisted.

"Drag him back!" he yelled to Ah Sam.

But the Chinese soldiers had another objective, or they assumed that that shot sufficed; a shot fired on impulse, and for no purpose. They swept past, and fresh battle broke ahead of them.

Manuel was on his feet, though clutching a sill with one hand. With the other he gripped his leg. "Is nothing, no bone broke, just begin to hurt like hell."

He was shaking from shock, and from the chilly rain. His face twitched. Despite the mud, it was easy to see that he was slate-gray from the shock of an ounce and a half slug.

"Wait, I'm going in!"

GARNER, running at a crouch, made it through the beaten zone, and got to the breach in the *yamen* wall. The garden was littered with furniture, scrolls, bales of cotton and silk burst open and half gutted. There were pots, kettles, lacquer screens, garments, broken dishes. A dead horse lay in a fish pool. The others had stampeded from the stable, one end of which had collapsed from a shell-burst. Smoke overhung all the crazy confusion.

An old man staggered about, zigzagging without aim. He was whimpering, hugging a teapot against his drenched tunic.

Garner got all this as he headed for the outer court. At the same time, he wondered where else the Hales might be, and hoped that they had not been in cubicles exposed to the first rush of looters.

He had to have something to break the locks. He stopped to look about him for anything at all, to belabor a door. He was still groggy from the shell-blast, and distracted by doubts as to Manuel's ability to navigate with a game leg. He began to feel as stupid and aimless as that old man who whimpered, and circled about, not quite knowing what he sought.

Yells from the front pulled Garner together. Then behind him, he heard Manuel

cry in a shaky voice, "Look, I can walk, it is nothing."

He shook off Ah Sam's arm, tottered, and fell in a heap of rubbish. From the front came many voices, a crashing and pounding, a metallic screeching, a splintering of wood. Two yelling Chinamen raced into the garden, looking for cover. Two shots echoed.

Garner jumped up from beside Manuel. "Looters back, they're tearing down the doors," he shouted, and then, pistol in hand, went to drive them off.

Rain slashed his face as he ran into the outer court. For a moment he could see nothing but the murky shapes milling about in the half-flooded court. Then it became clear: the newcomers were seamen from the *China Queen*. He recognized Jenkins, who was prying at a cubicle door.

Next he saw Joab Erskine, who had his back to the rain.

The skipper's pistol snapped into line. Then his weapon was knocked aside. The shot smashed against the wall, a yard wide. "That's Denny!" a woman cried, and Garner stood there, unable to advance or retreat. He was too busy wondering what had kept him from firing just as Syria flung herself against Erskine and into the path of whatever bullet might have the captain's address.

Hermon Hale, drenched and bedraggled and battered as his daughter, now came from the surrounding rescuers. Lengths of chain clanked. Like Syria, he had not been unshackled. Blows of a broadaxe had chopped a link.

The seamen backed away, and fanned out. Garner, pistol in hand, was advancing, and they wanted none of it.

"Denny, quit it!" Syria cried, and let go Erskine to turn to Garner. "It's all right, we're all right, he came and got us. The *China Queen's* guns gave Potter a chance to leave the factory before the looters got him. Everything's all right, Denny."

You couldn't buck Erskine's luck. Far from turning pirate, he'd nosed after the men o' war, made good use of his twelve-pounders, organized a landing party, and here he was, the rescuing hero, not the reckless fool who had caused all the trouble.

Garner had halted. Now he took a pace back. "You win, Erskine. I leave you to your winnings."

HERMON HALE, cocky as ever, snapped at him, "Don't be a fool! The town's going crazy! The Chinese've fired on a couple of flags of truce. The factories are looted, the factors are barricaded and saving their hides as best they can. If the natives don't get you, the landing parties will, nobody'd ever take you for a white man. We'll have the devil's own time getting back, the crowd of us.

The concussion of a shell made him lurch forward. Fragments whined, and pieces of tiling pattered into the court.

"I'll take my chances. Stand fast, I'll drop the first man that makes a false move."

The rain had somewhat abated. The sullen clouds were thinner. There was enough light now for them to see that he meant precisely what he said. Erskine shrugged, and let Syria take his pistol. He'd not dared risk moving the weapon to holster it.

"Denny," Syria demanded, "do you have to be pig-headed? Good Lord, it's not your fault you were a minute late."

He looked at Erskine, and without answering, backed slowly toward the garden entrance. Now that his raid to take the ship's papers had been futile, his good intentions had won nothing but a splendid chance to face charges of piracy.

Jenkins, having finally decided that there was no use breaking any more doors, since the prisoners were at liberty, called to Garner, and would have followed, but someone warned him, and he stood fast.

Once in the garden, Garner saw that Dom Manuel was in bad shape. "You've got more than a slug through the leg," he said, noting the blood that was seeping through the muddy coat.

"Only one little bullet." He touched the stain, high up on the lapel. "Is nothing."

The sounds of rioting, skirmishing, looting, came in strongly from every quarter. The guns of the warships were still booming and bellowing. The forts behind Canton answered, and the major landing parties pressed on, muskets crackling, deep-voiced Sikhs yelling.

The only safe place for Dom Manuel was aboard the *China Queen*. Garner knew

better than to believe that he and Ah Sam could get him to any other place for treatment.

"Take it easy," he said, giving him a pat on the shoulder. "It's all right in front, there's help enough to carry you."

"Ha! The British come to find the Hales?"

"That's right, and they're all OK too," Garner assured him, and went toward the front, empty handed and with a brisk stride.

XXVI

THE forts behind Canton were silent, and so were the guns of the British men o' war. Sikhs and redcoats returned to the ships with their triumph and their wounded. Smoke overhung the city and the plundered factories. Garner, seeing all this from the deck of the *China Queen,* turned to Endurance Potter who, like the other foreign traders had found refuge aboard ship, and said, "Well—it's over. For Lin, and for me."

The long-faced factor laid a hand on Garner's slumped shoulder. "For Lin, yes. He has lost face."

"So have I. Erskine got there just in time to make a monkey of me. Ever-invincible Erskine, sitting goggle-eyed in his cabin, blinking like a toad in a hailstorm, knows nothing, can't learn anything about Syria and her father, and nobody blames him for that. Who could? Then I come along—"

"And you warned him of pirates, and a fire raft."

Garner shook his head, and hunched forward even more despondently. "I'm not so sure of that. The way he slipped the cable—"

Potter interposed, "True, he'd been on the alert for some days, he'd mustered his thoughts far in advance, it's no wonder that everything moved like a drill on a parade ground, the instant you yelled. But you boarded the ship without being detected. The great man wasn't all-knowing and all-seeing!"

"All right, what I meant to say was, I come along, give him hell about Syria, put him in his place, give him a lordly horse-laugh, and leave with the ship's papers. Me, I will do the big job, bribe Bigoted-Virtue Lin into putting the screws on that stinker of a Tang. Damnation, I wasn't trying to feather my own nest or hunt glory! Anyway, along comes Erskine today, easily, nothing hindering him but a heavy rain. Anyone else might have blundered to Lin's *yamen,* while I did the job I'd set out to do at Tang's. But Infallible Erskine couldn't bungle the play that counted! I'm hoodooed!"

"See here, Garner!" Potter's voice became stern. "You and Ah Sam would have had your hands full, getting the Hales and Manuel aboard ship. Stop being sorry for yourself!"

"I'm not! I merely feel like a fool."

"Keep at it long enough and you'll be one!"

Garner sat up straight, cocked his head, eyed the coffin-faced factor. He grinned wryly. "Right on all counts, Mr. Potter. Truth is, I've been worrying about Erskine. He'll finally slip and finish the *China Queen.* Lose her, and all hands."

"You'd do better to worry about Dom Manuel."

"Dr. Binns seems to know what he's doing. Talk about luck. Missionary comes to your factory to dodge rioters, and so he's right handy when we need a medico."

"Erskine," Potter pointed out, "has done the handsome thing."

Garner extended his hands, turned them palms up, and then palms down. "No irons, not yet. Handsome, all right. That trick I turned off Macao could be stretched to piracy. He'd find some way of proving it was on the high seas! Here I am, no place else to go, too bedraggled even to think of trying."

"There isn't and there wasn't any other place. Buck up, man! What is on your mind?"

"Erskine's too big-hearted about everything. That worries me."

"Unusual complaint," was the dry comment.

"He's fixing to scuttle me with a soft touch. Syria and her father are bound to give me credit for a good try. And Erskine knows who's buttering his bread, so he's being nice, beating them to it. Only, too nice. See what I mean?"

Potter stroked his chin. "Mmmm . . . yes. Syria has been regarding him with

what I might call wide and adoring eyes and fluttering about him ever since we came aboard. The intangible element, as it were. Sad, but still, hardly as bad as being in irons."

Garner spat. "When I had him covered with a gun, I told him I'd end up in command of the *China Queen*. And at the time, I did have every chance."

"If the imperial junks hadn't stood to the British men o' war, and if Lin had taken Tang's prisoners, and if Mr. Erskine hadn't had a happy inspiration. Hmmm . . . yes, you've lost face. As long as you admit you have."

The lookout bawled, "Boat, ahoy!"

THE answer was a jabber of pidgin-English. Garner hitched his chair clear of the starboard lifeboat to get a look at the party pulling alongside. One of the rowers had fixed a white flag to an oar; another had an American flag. None were armed. One of the passengers wore a gold button on his cap.

On the breast of his dove-colored tunic was a foot-square panel embroidered with a long-tailed jay.

Potter adjusted his glasses. "Ninth grade mandarin. The chap with him's probably an interpreter."

The official's companion asked and received permission for the Honorable Sang Chung Li to board the clipper. One of the watch went down the companionway to notify the skipper.

Whether from courtesy or curiosity, Erskine came on deck instead of waiting for the visitors in his reception room. The interpreter, a shrivelled little man in shiny black Shantung clothes of European cut, held a parcel wrapped in silk, and sealed with a big, square chop.

"Good morning, Honorable Captain Garner," he said, laboriously and successfully sounding each "r." "The Honorable Sang Chung Li pays respects and compliments, with message to follow."

"Captain Garner!" Erskine cut in, and frowned. Then, he smiled, and somewhat too affably. "Hey, mister! He means you. Captain—" The skipper clasped his two hands, Chinese fashion, bowed with ironic ceremony. "Commission in the Imperial navy, eh? Well, well, mister. You've finally found that promotion. Let me congratulate you, sir."

He turned to bow to the interpreter. He gestured with elaborate deference to the mandarin. "Tell His Excellency he has the wrong men. Here is Captain Garner. I merely command the ship."

Hermon Hale, sharp-eyed and squinting, had come on deck. He glared at the two Chinamen, and muttered, "The barbarous heathens ought to be keel-hauled!"

While there was no doubt that the interpreter understood, he turned to his chief and delivered Erskine's correction and address of welcome. Garner, red to the ears, had stepped forward to greet the mandarin.

"Tell the Honorable Sang Chung Li," he said, "that there has been a mistake. I am not captain."

The interpreter smiled blandly. "Merely honorary title of respect, Captain Garner. Please accept token of esteem, and profound regrets of Commissioner Lin. Abject apology for failing to execute gentlemen's agreement in re captives of Honorable Governor Tang. Said Governor getting clandestine warning, absconded to evade Commissioner Lin's wrath, also executioner's sword."

"Oh." Garner took a deep breath, and accepted the parcel, which was perhaps two inches thick, and twelve by eighteen. "He left the country?"

"Yes, going by sea, who knows where?"

Potter had stepped up. He whispered, "Let me take it and open it for you, the formal touch. Too bad Ah Sam isn't handy to interpret."

Garner, surrendering the parcel, which Potter had respectfully taken with both hands, addressed the mandarin: "Please tell Commissioner Lin that his consideration and generosity are appreciated all the more for being undeserved."

The exchange of compliments went on while Potter went below to rummage his effects and find a present for Lin. He came up with a small clock, which he had wrapped in a scarf.

AFTER further courtesies, the mandarin went over the side. The party had not even shoved off when Erskine's condescension abruptly vanished. He snapped, as from sudden realization that he had missed

the entire point, "Here, let's see that package! These damn Chinamen get things all fouled up, he meant me, not you!"

"Probably so," Garner admitted. "I guessed that before you did. If this is the log and ship's papers, you're right."

That was precisely what the parcel did contain. As he took off the wrapping, he opened the book where a marker had been slipped into it.

"Two pages cut out," Garner said, handing the log to Erskine.

"What's this Chinese splashed across the page?" the skipper demanded. "Where's Ah Sam?"

Potter's interpreter came up to translate. He read, "Honorable Captain Erskine: your humble servant, Lin Tseh-hsu, Bearer of the Imperial Seal, takes the liberty of removing the discreditable history of a good ship fallen into bad hands, and sincerely hopes that her next master treads the paths of virtue."

BEFORE Erskine could shout him down, Ah Sam had read the entire passage. The skipper snatched the log, and cursing Lin, he went below with his papers.

Hermon Hale shook his fist at the departing boat. "You tell that button-topped beggar," he croaked, "I'll bring a ship-load of opium to town and make him smoke it! Tell that insolent, that insufferable—that barbarous heathen he'll find this on the indemnity bill!"

And Hale went below.

Potter turned to Garner, to say, "You have gained face, just as well-meaning Lin intended you to. But you've gained nothing else."

"Hasn't improved matters much. Funny, when I saw the *China Queen* making sail, that night, I thought Erskine was hauling out rather than face the music. Only, it was Tang who'd do that. Where'd he go?"

"Syria said he left the *yamen* in a great hurry, with his private army, and porters carrying chests of what looked like sycee silver. Ten to one he'll turn pirate, until or unless he can bribe himself out of this. Which I think he can't."

"Though perhaps he could have, if he'd not lost so much face when his aide de camp, Fu Wha Cheng, was exposed as a river pirate."

"So, Tang has to end up by being a big scale one! Crazy logic!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. You were worrying about how *you'd* lost face. Try and get rid of the idea that the Chinese are utterly topsy-turvy in their ways, and a bit mad to boot." He looked back over the town, and at the Shameen, and shook his head. "End of Lin's ideals and zeal. The Chinese were right in principle, and now they're surely going to pay a terrific indemnity for the damage to our factories, and for the 2,500,000 pounds of smuggled opium they destroyed. More will come from India, and they'll not dare complain, not after this lesson. And there won't be any bonds signed."

"Where'll that leave you?"

"You heard what Mr. Hale said a moment ago." The factor sighed. "I'm going back to the States. Let someone else handle it! Luckily, I can afford to go home, I've saved a few dollars."

"Wish I could say as much," Garner muttered, and sat down again to think it out. But whatever he might devise for himself, he saw nothing that could possibly keep the *China Queen* out of the opium traffic, now that Hermon Hale wanted not only quick profit to compensate for lost time, but also an answer to Commissioner Lin's farewell message.

XXVII

BECAUSE of plundered factories, and the disorders in Canton, trade was at a standstill. Some of the British fleet, not required for subduing the imperial junks and the garrisons along the Pearl River, had gone north to "open" Amoy and Foochow to unrestricted commerce. Meanwhile, the *China Queen* was back in her berth off the Praya; and since she could not pick up tea for an immediate run back to New York, there was time enough to look for other outlets for the cargo she had brought from the States.

Lin, who had been beaten at every point by the British, had to tighten up on the Portuguese, to convince the emperor in far-off Pekin that the government of Kwang Tung Province still had power. The result of this pressure was that no one in Macao could risk dealing with the *China Queen*.

However, she was able to get supplies and ships' stores.

Sitting in the salon, Syria said to Garner, "Dad's thinking of going to Singapore, or maybe Calcutta to dispose of our cargo. By then, trade'll be opened up in Canton again."

"By that time, Manuel'll be all ready to go ashore and patch things up with his family. And maybe with Antonia's."

"Really think so? Oh, I hope so! I think it's marvelous the way he stuck with you through thick and thin."

"I'm just guessing. After all, a lot of the best families have Chinese blood, and bit by bit they might stow the pretense, it's all a matter of face-saving." He paused, regarded her intently. "I thought I never would be having a word with you, though I appreciated your helping take care of Manuel when he was out of his head with a high fever."

"I avoided you intentionally, but not because I wanted to."

"I was sure enough of the first."

"But you couldn't guess the second?"

"Optimism's bad fare. Always leaves an after-taste."

"Just for that, I'll not tell you the good news."

"Maybe you'd better not. Look how it turned out in New York!"

"I could choke you! No, I'll tell you instead, and then—"

"Then I will choke, eh?"

But before she could reveal what she'd been saving up, the skipper came in. Syria said, "Oh, Joab, I was on the point of talking about you."

"Speak of the devil, eh?" He turned to Garner. "Mister, I've been thinking things over. To be honest, I have to admit that however much we were on the alert, that fire raft could have finished us if you'd not sung out in time. And risking your neck to break into Tang's *yamen,* and then the ticklish business of bargaining with Lin—" He thrust out his hand. "You were wrong, off Foochow, but how the devil could I call it mutiny? After all that followed. And Syria's a witness, I mean what I say."

Garner shook hands on that. "Thank you, sir. This is something the stars hadn't predicted."

They looked each other in the eye, and clinched mutual understanding with a good-humored chuckle.

"Still figuring to command the *China Queen?*"

There was no sting in the words, and Garner answered, "She's in good hands, sir."

Syria was very happy about it all, and gave Erskine a look that told him how wonderful he was, and how magnanimous.

"Mister," the skipper went on, "I'd like to have you back in your old berth."

"I've been in irons, sir," was the sober answer. "How could I exercise command on this ship?"

Erskine gestured to dismiss the objection. "After what you did later, you've not lost face with the crew." He grinned, and rubbed his jaw. "And if you have, you still won't lose much time whipping them into shape."

"How about Butler?"

"Oh, Butler! He's got a chance to command the *Sylph,* bound for Calcutta."

"We're bound for Calcutta, I gather." Then, at Erskine's nod, "And if we don't come back loaded to the Plimsoll mark with opium, I'll eat the cable."

"That's up to Mr. Hale. Wake up, Garner! Our job is to take her out and bring her back. The import'll be legal before the British get through settling with Pekin, and you can bet on that."

Garner could feel Syria's intentness. From the corner of his eye, he saw her lips move. While he couldn't read them, he knew she was thinking, *"Just this once, to get on your feet again, to keep your record clear, there are lots of other ships."*

She was right. A seaman's duty was to sail. He didn't make laws or customs except at sea. Leave the land to landlubbers. He remembered how Lin, that Chinese gentleman, had been undermined by his own subordinates, rather than by foreigners. He remembered the myriad of ants, hauling away the gigantic cockroach they had killed. Since Lin couldn't beat the ants of China, how could one foreigner?

He remembered what Governor Tang had said at the Senator's house: *all rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea remains salt.* And he, Garner, was too small a stream to change the flavor of China. Nor was Endurance Potter an impressive torrent.

And Potter, elderly and with enough saved up, could well afford to make a fine point of principles and ethics.

Syria breathed, in little more than a whisper, "You owe it to yourself, Denny. Dad is playing smart aleck this time, I think he's had his fill but won't admit it."

"Very well, sir," Garner agreed. "Shall I sign up?"

"Consider that you've never been logged, mister." That hearty chuckle. "The Honorable Lin tended to that detail, and maybe the poor devil's entitled to his last laugh." Then, soberly, "No more sharp tricks like that at Foochow. I didn't like it myself, not any too much."

THIS would be tough on Hanson, the second, but that would in the end take care of itself, Garner reasoned as he went back to the cabin from which Butler's gear had been taken. *Lilly's Astrology* lay on the table. Whatever else had changed, William Lilly's work remained a permanent fixture.

Then, thinking of the gilded goddess of the figurehead, "Lady, since I can't keep you out of the dirty business, I'm going along."

He couldn't ask Kwan Yin to give him a hand. Having once saved her, it now seemed more than ever his obligation to stick. He began to understand another Chinese quirk which Endurance Potter had explained: That the reason the natives will so seldom try to save a drowning person, however easily they might do so, was because they would, according to their tradition, be responsible thereafter for that person's welfare, and support.

"The rescuer," Potter had said, "doesn't get gratitude. He's incurred a debt and a responsibility."

While this had seemed absurd, it now made sense.

Presently a *tanka* pulled up alongside. The passenger was a sharp-eyed Chinese woman wearing deep-blue trousers and a black jacket. She hailed the watch in pidgin-English, saying she had a letter for Dom Manuel, but she refused to drop it into the basket lowered to the boat. And she got her way about coming aboard to hand the message to Dom Manuel, who was recuperating in the apprentice's room, at the starboard after corner of the forehouse, where Garner had once been imprisoned.

Had they tried, neither crew nor officers could have understood the conversation that followed. It was servant jargon, Cantonese and Portuguese blended, each corrupting the other. After some moments, the middle-aged *amah* came out, screeched, "Missee Ga'na'! Missee Ga'na'!"

Garner came down from the poop. "What do you want?"

She gestured, the backwards beckoning of her race, and then pointed at the apprentice's room. Garner went in, the *amah* following. The patient looked as though something had crowded several weeks of convalescence into a few minutes.

"Denny, my friend, what you think?"

"You look as if that note you sent ashore got to Antonia."

"That is the holy truth! Yes—" He caught Garner's hand with both his own. "It is your great idea. She goes to America with me. Just before we sail, you go ashore to find her where she meet you, not at the house, you understand."

"Mmm . . . yes, I understand that much! But look here, we're coming back from Calcutta. They'll be looking for her, raising merry hell."

"With getting the cargo, that is six-seven weeks, even if the wind is nice, which I do not understand. When someone is gone that long in this country, is gone what you call for keeps."

WHILE Manuel was right, Garner pointed out one big hole in his logic: "She'll be missed some time that night, and we'll be leaving at sunrise. They won't put two and two together at once, but by the time we're back, and they don't have any reasonable rumors about kidnappers taking her, getting cold feet, and then killing her, they'll wonder about the *China Queen*. And Dom Joao's a senator."

"But when we come back, is to Chinese water, up the river, not to Macao."

"I can't promise that, neither can the skipper. Why can't you wait and then pick her up, we'll be heading straight for New York, with every stitch of canvas, and the only thing that can overhaul us is a Malay *prahu*."

"All right, then I tell you what is not

taste too good. The hurry is this. Dom Joao do not like the scandal which I make, instead of put Antonia in the convent, he is marry her to a Portuguese fellow, nice fellow, not too poor, only is not of fine family like the Senator."

Making an honest woman of Antonia? Picking her a husband who was all right, but whose social standing wouldn't be hurt by a bride who'd been involved in a scandal? Garner gave both thoughts an unspoken "yes." He said, "Putting it that way, something has to be done in a hurry, and you're in no shape to go ashore. You're lucky Doc Binns didn't have to saw off your leg!"

"Then you go?"

"Did she ask me to? In that note?"

"Nothing in the note but much love. This woman, Tien Yuk, she tell me plenty, is bad write too much. Antonia remember you, Tien Yuk, she remember too."

"She one of the Senator's servants?"

"Oh, no! Tien Yuk is friend of Antonia's *amah*. Everyone watching her, nobody watches Tien Yuk, you understand?"

"I'll fix it up. Hanson'll take my watch. Now ask Tien Yuk where and how and everything else, I can't climb the Senator's wall again, or come out with a girl under my arm. No breaking and entering, no tricks to get me fouled up. The skipper and I have buried the grudges, and I'm on topside again."

"That is fine. Syria, she tell me yesterday, she fix it up."

"Then you knew it before I did! Well, that's not so strange. I'll have to arrange with the skipper for a passenger. I don't think he'll kick, but there is risk, you and Antonia coming back this way."

"I have study it out, right now!" Manuel declared, triumphantly. "You leave us in Singapore, Calcutta, any place, then we get a ship to Anjier in Java where you pass going to New York."

"And we'll pick you up? That's foolproof. But suppose we don't meet? I've got some money you're welcome to, but hardly enough for two to go from Singapore to Anjier to New York on some other ship."

"Do not think of expenses, let me write something for Tien Yuk, I have a cousin, we are like brothers, in one-two hours, he sends me plenty cash."

XXVIII

THE day after the old *amah's* second visit, Garner went ashore. Portuguese dignitaries drove in their carriages along the Praya. Antonia, guarded more closely than ever by her *duenna,* might be in one of the vehicles making the circuit of the settlement. Though the broad avenue which skirted the breakwater still got the slanting rays of the sun, the twin crests of the peninsula cast their lengthening shadows into the maze of close-packed houses, tortuous alleys, and cobblestone-paved streets at their feet.

Garner paused for a moment to watch a *prahu* swooping for the quai: Manila men, or perhaps Moros from Sulu, bringing pearls and gold dust and ebony. He wondered if Isaac McKim or any other naval architect could ever design a clipper to equal the speed of a *prahu*. . . .

He squinted into the ruddy glare that rimmed the hillcrests, and the fort, and readily picked the belfries of the church from which Antonia's elopement would start. There was no need for him to spot it, since that, of all places, was the one in whose vicinity he must not be seen. But he could not help be concerned about the girl, and her problem of evading a *duenna* or whoever else would be watching her. His fantastic blunderings about hostile Canton seemed not to be risky or uncertain as to what Antonia proposed.

He told himself that she'd carry it off with the same coolness that had marked her realization of having admitted a stranger instead of Dom Manuel to her room. Needn't be worried about Antonia, and actually, he was not. His anxiety came from knowing that she had to succeed the first attempt; that if anything slipped, there'd be no second trial, for the *China Queen* was to sail at dawn. And he could not endure the thought of telling Manuel that he'd come back alone.

The *prahu* was now moored, a slender, fragile shell, though she must have been as tough and staunch as the brown men who had driven her a thousand miles from home. He admired, yet he also resented anything which was faster than the *China Queen*. He let his glance reach well offshore, until he

picked out the *Sylph*. Amos Butler's new command, a brigantine with speed in every line.

"You'd sail around her and not half try," he told himself, by way of disposing of the *prahu*.

He was about to go into town when one of the waterfront hangers-on accosted him: a hungry, haggard-looking fellow, dirty yet making the impossible effort to keep clean. Not yet ragged, but well on the way.

"How about the price of a meal, mate?" He added, defiantly, "No, I don't want a drink."

In order to be inconspicuous, and above all, to avoid looking like a ship's officer, Garner had worn an old suit. He was unshaven, and just one degree short of sloppy, yet the derelict had unerringly picked him as being a long way from down and out. He wasn't any too pleased at being noticed, but he shrugged off his qualm, and dug into his pocket. "Always easier to get grog than a meal. Good luck!"

But there never was any but bad luck for a fellow on the beach, particularly since blockade and naval battle had brought shipping to a standstill.

He went from sun into twilight. After several blocks upgrade, he turned into a street which followed the contours of the hill. Shops, restaurants, bars, gambling dives, tea rooms: and then, among other pawnbrokers, whose places were conspicuous because of their fortress-like fronts, barred windows, and upper-floor lofts guarded against fire and thieves, he found the one Antonia's messenger had mentioned.

Rustumji Tata. Banker. That much he could read. The rest of the inscription on the sign was in Chinese, Urdu, Arabic, and a number of European languages, all of them assuring passersby that whatever their language, the proprietor spoke it.

Garner noted the passageway which opened from the back, and into a courtyard. There was also a wicket at the right of the building, presumably leading to a side door. He passed on. He had not, and did not wish to meet the Parsi proprietor. While pawnbrokers often conveniently forget faces, their business is as much based on noting details as on being aware of values; and the inquiries following Antonia's disappearance would stimulate Rustumji Tata's memory.

A short block downhill, a left turn, and presently Garner was at the entrance of the Manchester Inn. A man whose one remaining eye was sharp enough for two looked up from the counter which commanded both the small lobby and the taproom opening from it. For a moment, all his vigilance centered on Garner. None of the loungers noticed him; they were too busy sobering up, or estimating the days till they'd be on the beach. He paid in advance, and got a key.

"End of the hall and to the right."

THE room was just big enough to have allowed him to swing a cat by the tail, and without braining the animal. The grandfather of mirrors, apparently a veteran of earthquakes and bombardments, was barely bright enough to make the wall seem dingier. There was a washstand, and a bed whose mattress was a "donkey's breakfast," though thicker than found in the forecastle.

He looked from the window, and into a court whose further wall was the back of Rustumji Tata's pawnshop. Having verified his recollections of the general arrangement of the buildings of that block, he sat down, for it was not quite dark enough for prowling. Then he got up to go into the hall, and try the door. Stairs led to the court. From the landing, he got the pattern of adjacent courts, which were connected by wickets.

From the ground floor of a nearby gambling house came the screeching of Chinese gamblers risking a tenth of a cent a play. On the upper floor, behind drawn shades, the stakes were heavy and the house served wine. No bankroll was too big, and none too small. The intermediate floor was for middle-sized gamesters: no refreshments, but there were chairs so you could lose in comfort.

Later, as he went down to the court, he felt that his was the biggest gamble in Macao. "Think it was the start of my own honeymoon," he told himself, and shivered a little. He closed his eyes, as if to shut out a persistent picture, as if denying the possibility would insure him against boarding the *China Queen* alone, and telling Manuel that something had slipped.

A bell tolled. For a moment, he had the urge to hurry to the church, and there wait for Antonia to step out, so that he'd know

sooner that she'd actually tricked her guardians. He'd follow her, from a distance. Surely no harm in that.

But he knew how anxiety was making him see his plans in a new and deceptive light. So he waited, and wondered how closely guarded Antonia was to slip out of church and make for Rustumji Tata's pawnshop.

His uneasiness soon took a different flavor. Rather, he became aware that what he'd considered anxiety on behalf of Antonia and Manuel was only such in an indirect sense. Someone was watching him, stalking him. Outwardly, there was nothing to justify this feeling, yet he could not shrug it off.

A DOOR opened behind him. As he turned, the murky light, the fumes of tobacco and of spirits told him that this was an exit from the taproom of the Manchester Inn. A man, stepping into the court, checked up at Garner's abrupt about-face.

The chill still raced down his spine, and the metallic taste was yet plain in Garner's mouth when he recognized the stranded seaman who had wanted a meal, not a drink. Both relaxed; the other grinned, made as if to speak, then looked sheepish.

"Uh—ah—" His glance shifted to the pawnshop's back door. "It's you."

"Yes."

"I wasn't getting a drink."

Garner shrugged. He didn't give a hoot what the man had been getting at the bar. He was merely irritated.

The stranger went on, "When I cracked the door, I thought it was you, and then I thought it wasn't."

"Doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"Um—uh—but I couldn't decide. Not right away. I ought to give you back your money. I was waiting for you to move on, I didn't want you to see me."

"Why give me money, and me not see you?"

"I found something. A necklace thing or—anyway, the clerk—" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Wouldn't give me credit on it, he said take it to the Parsi. And I don't know what I might get. And you'd know I'd not be going in there to pay out anything."

Garner eased up. "So you don't know yet what to give back to me? Well, to hell with it, you'll be needing it, keep it and welcome."

The man fumbled in his pocket. "This looks good. Maybe you need your money worse than I do."

Something twinkled in the callused palm: a sunburst of small rubies and diamonds. In the dusk, it was impossible to guess at the value or genuineness of the jewel. Apparently it had slipped from a neckchain. Garner cocked his head, squinted. The other said, "Take a good look—" and offered the ornament.

What followed confused Garner then, and forever after. He knew all too quickly what had happened, but he could never figure out how it had happened.

It was as though intently regarding the gems had hypnotized him. The numbness that started in his head was spreading. The rubies expanded into great blots of red. The court blackened. Strangely, he did notice one detail: in the back door of Rustumji Tata's was a Chinese woman wearing a black jacket and trousers. She had a bundle balanced on her head. She made no sound. Nothing made any sound.

Not even the second wallop, which scattered Garner's lingering senses. But, though he no longer heard nor saw nor felt anything, a fragment of consciousness remained, and it said to itself, "*. . . asked me for money . . . gave him enough to make him think I had plenty . . . that sunburst's been paying for itself a long time. . . .*"

This knowledge blended with an enormous pain, although not of the body, because the second smack had numbed all sensation. The pain came from knowing that Antonia would look for him, and not find him. It'd be a long time before he picked himself out of some dark corner, went through pockets turned inside out, and tried to remember how it had all happened, and why he'd come ashore. . . .

All these things flickered through deeply armored centers of his consciousness, and then blacked out.

XXIX

GARNER awakened in darkness so solid that for a moment the possibility of having been slugged blind made him ignore

the head-splitting ache, and the turmoil in his stomach. Finally, he noted a thread of light leaking past a threshold. Next, his hands touched wood, not flagstone. He was neither in jail nor in a courtyard.

On hands and knees, and unsteadily, he crept until he came to the wall. He made a circuit of it before stopping to check up on his pockets. The result was not surprising. They were empty. His watch, his pistol, his jackknife were gone. But he still had shoes. That helped in more ways than one.

His coat was slashed. Thorough fellow; he knew the seaman's old habit of hiding emergency funds. One thing, however, he had overlooked. Garner took off his shoes, and clawed at the insoles. In the base of each heel was a recess exactly filled by a gold piece. Not that it mattered, but finding out was something to do while his wits collected.

Antonia—

He might as well have been slugged again.

For a moment he hoped that she had been rash enough to carry on, alone, when it became clear to her that something had happened to him. Then he hoped that she had not been sufficiently desperate to venture to the waterfront to get a *tanka*. She'd be fair game for any number of reasons. Even if she did get to an "egg boat," the *tanka* girls, sensing she was on the loose, might rob and drop her overboard. Knowing all this, Antonia would have gone home, regardless of what she'd face there.

He had to get out, and regardless of risk, learn whether she was at her father's house. Beyond that, he couldn't think of anything but facing Manuel, who had failed him only once, and then by stopping a bullet.

They had skipped a block of sulphur matches. He struck one. He was in a bare and solid storage closet, judging from the size and the lack of windows.

The door was solid, far too much so to have its panels butted asunder by the shoulder. He sat down to think. This was once he needed a drink. He got up and began to kick the door. Not violently, but steadily, methodically.

Garner did not know how long he continued the thumping.

Finally, because the measured pounding would irritate whoever was in the building, he got an answer: and though the speaker's words were beyond understanding, it was clear that he needed a sedative.

Garner continued the maddening pound-whack-thump. Water torture with variations. The effort made him sweat. His lips were cracked and his throat was dry. He used up the air faster than it leaked in. But he wouldn't lay off.

Another protest encouraged him.

At last someone came clumping along the hallway. Objections and questions in Portuguese, to which he countered in English, "You pigs, let me out! What's the idea?"

The answer was in sketchy English. The speaker didn't know, didn't care, and for the love of God, shut up!

"Or you'll call the police?" Garner retorted.

IT WAS plain that the man wasn't interested in legal aid. Probably the scrupulous seaman who had found a jewel had had his victim locked up until after the sailing of some ship, to win time for other getaway. Just why he hadn't made it murder, was far from clear. The Macao police reasoned that when a man was dead, he couldn't squawk, hence no one was embarrassed, hence let well enough alone and concentrate on those who did protest, and would hand over *cumshaw*.

Pound-pound-pound.

"What you want? Go to sleep!"

"I want a drink."

"You shut up for a drink? Who pay?"

Garner dropped a gold piece. It tinkled musically.

"You wait. Five dollar, I bring it. You don't get out."

He quit thumping. Presently, two men approached. A key grated in the lock. The newcomer said, "You're staying till morning, don't get funny, or we'll floor you."

Garner was in no shape to fight anyone, and apparently the speaker knew this. The Portuguese had a dirk. The sandy-haired Nordic had a bottle of brandy.

"We just board here. This ain't our business, we snitched the key. You're staying here for all of me. Where's the five?"

Garner fumbled in his pocket. He handed

over the gold piece, which left the partners a fair profit to split.

"How about selling me your knife?"

"What you think?"

Garner got his other gold piece. "Not your fault if I cut a hole in the door."

No sale. These were honorable chaps.

Garner kept fingering the coin. "Well, open my damn bottle anyway. Got a corkscrew?"

Naturally not. He dropped the coin. And kept the bottle. But not for long. It shattered across the head of the man with the dirk. As he saw it, the trick that had nailed him was good enough to serve him. The other yelled, made a pass, but recoiled from the ragged bottle shoulder. "Get going, you son of a gun!" Garner shouted, and didn't disparage the fellow's courage one bit for not coming to grips with the ugly weapon which jabbed for his face.

Yet he circled, hoping to recover the knife. Garner wasn't any too steady. He'd used himself up with that one quick play.

Then a woman said, softly but clearly, "Don't move!" A pistol hammer clicked. The man recognized the menacing *snick* and turned. Garner chopped him at the base of the skull with the edge of his hand. That didn't require much force. The man dropped like a log, unconscious before he toppled.

And still Garner could hardly believe that it was Antonia who stood there with a small pistol. She wore the rumpled garment of a Chinese woman of the lower classes. On the floor lay a bundle the size of a melon. She handed him the pistol and caught his arm. "This way, quick, I show you."

He followed her down the hall, and past a closet whose door gaped open. "I was in there, not locked in," she whispered.

He saw already that he was in the upstairs part of another waterfront tavern. Voices came from a taproom. Voices and smells followed him and Antonia down a hall just a degree short of blackness, and thence into a court. He recognized the square mass of a pawnbroker's fortress.

"Rustumji Tata's," she told him. "I was in the door when you get knock out. Afraid to move. What can I do with a pistol, when everyone moves fast, maybe I kill you?"

"How many hit me?"

"One hit you, one came to help carry you." She pointed to a wicket. "From there into here. Too busy are they for seeing me, so I follow but not quick enough. I cannot see, I have to wait, be careful, is dangerous knocking on doors asking. Then the noise tells me where you are, only what must I do next?"

"What time is it?" he asked, hearing the single ambiguous stroke of a church bell.

"One and a half."

"Thank God! You mean, you waited ever since dusk?"

"Where should I go? Asking for police, they ask me what is in the bundle, then what?"

Pistol in his coat pocket, and ready for one decisive shot, Garner tramped along, with Antonia following on his heels.

"Well, what is in it?"

"My clothes which I wear to church. These Chinese things I wear underneath, fixed to not show, ooh, it is cold, they are too thin. Anyway, I change my clothes while my aunt is put lots of big candles by the holy images, which I give her, for my sins. But you don't understand our religion, I forget."

"No, and I don't understand your churches! Sssshhhh!"

He checked himself, gestured. Listened. No alarm, but neither any time for question. "Wait till we're aboard!"

They found a *tanka* and awakened the girls.

"Can do," the wenches sang out. "My savvee *China Queen.*"

AS THEY shoved off, Antonia explained further, and cleared up the mystery of peeling out of her dress while in church. "You see, I go to confess my sins, it is in a little box with a bench, the black curtains, the father he does not see the face, just the voice. So I have, oh, lots of terrible sins, and I am take off the dress while I talk. My aunt, she is busy lighting candles. Then I walk out, like one Chinese convert, with a bundle. Simple, no?"

"If I'd known that, I'd not worried about you. But I'd been slugged anyway. I wouldn't wish my worst enemy the head I'm wearing."

Antonia was shivering. She snuggled up

for warmth, but continued to shiver. "Why'n't you put on some of your clothes?" he asked.

SHE jerked away from him as though prodded by hot irons.

"Oh, impossible, dressing before a strange man."

This was beyond argument. Maybe Dom Manuel could explain.

Then the *tanka* girl in the prow sang out, "One piecee *China Queen,* no got."

Garner cursed, swallowed his impatience, and told her to keep trying. After an hour, it was clear that not even an expert could find the clipper. Moonrise failed to reveal her silhouette.

"Keep going! Stay off shore—no, to up, north."

"What you think?" Antonia asked, finally.

"Everything's crazy."

"Maybe the tide or wind or something?"

"That's just what we had to wait for. It's something else that made her haul for another berth."

"Pirates, maybe?"

They became weary of guessing and worrying. Macao, meanwhile, was being turned inside out on account of the disappearance of a slightly tarnished member of one of its leading families.

"I hate to think of what Manuel's thinking," he muttered.

By the first gray of dawn, Garner knew that they'd been left behind. Whatever had compelled the *China Queen's* premature sailing, she was gone. And he couldn't go ashore to inquire.

Captain Butler's *Sylph* was also gone. Some damnable quirk of opium, it seemed, cropped up each time to throw things out of joint. Then, he remembered the Malay boat, and told the *tanka* girls to pull up alongside. Some of her crew would surely be aboard. He said to Antonia, "That's the one thing that can outsail a clipper. Overhaul her as though she were anchored —oh, good God!"

"What? What is wrong?"

"Flat broke! I was so dizzy I forgot even to pick up my two gold pieces. And not even for a pistol would they chase a clipper down the China Sea!"

"I have some money, I bring some, you know, and not for the poor box. I bring some jewelries, too, nice things."

Garner drew a deep breath. "Manuel is getting a very smart wife, I begin to be envious. And why isn't your name Isabella?"

She frowned perplexedly. "Is nice, but why?"

"Your jewels furnish a ship," he explained, "to haul out for a new world. Now if these Manila men don't cut our throats before we get a chance to dicker—say, how come you brought a pistol?"

"If I miss you, and I go alone to the waterfront, maybe I need it."

"Been a God's blessing if you'd done it that way, you'd be aboard."

Then he hailed the *prahu.* He couldn't understand the answer. Antonia said, "Is Spanish, I can speak a little."

She did, and better, she made the watch get his idea. He called the skipper, who was a bettle-browed man with a broad nose, and penetrating little eyes. His name was Farid, and his bargaining was brief.

He concluded, "If she has started not before midnight, I catch her by sunset, you pay twice. Not catch her, you pay nothing."

She had stored her cargo ashore. She still had provisions. And a gamble was a gamble. And when Garner asked, "When do we make sail?" Farid answered, "Now, *señor!*"

Garner's only worry was from wondering whether Antonia was being re-compromised. . . .

XXX

IT WAS his first cruise aboard a *prahu.* Garner prayed it would be his last. Farid, driving her for honor, as well as wealth, had set extra sail that fitted into no category known to occidental seamanship. Her mast bowed, quivered until it sang. The stays made menacing music. The thin hull vibrated until Garner's flesh began to creep and twitch, and his nerves threatened to snap.

And the pounding! A remorseless hammer-whack-thump that promised to telescope his spine, not so much from the violence as from repetition. The ache that began at the base of his skull spread until it filled his entire head, whereupon it began

to creep between his shoulders, and down his arms.

Farid grinned, shouted something lost in the drumming and screaming, and bent another scrap of sail. The little brown men, none of them more than five-feet-three, but muscled like giants, were riding the outrigger struts, shifting their weight inboard or out to keep her from capsizing from the insane press of sail. Sometimes they shifted fore and aft, to adjust her trim according to curious laws which Garner was too dizzy to ponder.

BUT he could feel that these maneuvers increased her speed, and that the trim had constantly to be changed, to accord with wind and course and current. Where at the beginning he had considered Farid a fiercely-amiable ape wearing a black and yellow turban and a few other human trimmings, he now saw the man was a cross between magician and master violinist.

"This man—" he bellowed into Antonia's ear, and wished she were Syria. "This man makes a fool of the best skipper I saw, or heard of!"

"Can he go faster?" Antonia queried. "My head aches, but I like it."

Her eyes and her smile clarified the odd statement. Like Garner, she was drenched with salt spray, and windburned. Too late, she rigged a veil of some of the clothes that propriety forbade her from donning in front of strange men.

Rice was cooked during the race, and salt fish.

Ten hours, and no sail sighted. Farid insisted that the *China Queen* was miles astern; more plausibly, that for all his doing his best to follow the normal route between Macao and Singapore, no one had any guarantee that the *China Queen* had followed it. One could miss her, even with her prodigious masts, because the *prahu* was so close to the water.

"But we beat them to Singapore, one day, two days," he promised.

And that, barring wreck, was sure as dawn.

"Land-ho!" Garner bawled, and pointed, just as the lookout gave the same in the Moro tongue.

It was on the starboard bow.

Farid said, "Hainan."

"Good lord! Antonia, tell him it's impossible!"

She did, and Farid laughed. "Hainan," he repeated.

Garner looked at the sun, and reckoned from the church bell time of leaving Macao. If that was Hainan Island, this nameless shell had averaged more than nineteen knots.

Presently, as she rounded a headland, dense fog blotted out land and sea. A gun boomed. Someone was checking the distance from ship to island by timing the echo. Another shot. Two ships. Keeping in touch with each other. They'd been fog-bound, it seemed. Garner listened, as Farid took in sail. He heard bells, which confirmed his first guess.

"That *Sylph, China Queen,*" Farid declared, basing his hunch on what he'd heard of brigantine and clipper standing for Calcutta, going together for mutual protection through pirate-infested areas.

Butler's new command mounted eight six-pounders and a long twelve, Garner had gathered. In addition to captain, three mates, and supercargo, she had a gunner and two gunners' mates, four quartermasters. The rest of the ship's company was Manila men and lascars. This was all in accord with the highest standards of the profession. Joab Erskine, however, hadn't bothered to imitate Butler, although he had mounted two more guns. Speed and skill would suffice. After all, he'd sailed up the river and shelled the factories into which looters had broken. He'd handle any junk or *prahu* the Gulf of Tonkin offered. . . .

The fog parted, revealing the *China Queen* and her companion, who was inshore of the clipper.

Farid hadn't missed by much time.

"Sail around her?" he asked. "Around both?"

"Do it, and you get this pistol!"

THE *prahu* bent all sail. The ships ahead were setting what they had taken in. Even so, the gap closed at a pace that made Garner blink. To make the circle, Farid had to sail far off the *China Queen's* port. As she came abeam, Antonia waved a petticoat. Either no one saw, or else no one would acknowledge the hail, doubtless mistaking it for a *prahu's* derision. Garner did

what he had doubted that any other occidental seaman would ever again do: he looked astern at the *China Queen* when she had all sails set.

He said to himself, "But what counts is she can hold her pace all the way to New York, regardless of weather, which is too much for any *prahu*. . . ."

Just how Farid was going to fare in beating across the *China Queen's* course to complete circling her and the speedy *Sylph*, was left to deduction rather than to observation. Four points on the *prahu's* port bow was a line of Chinese junks flying the dragon pennon.

"Imperial fleet using fog to waylay opium clippers," was Garner's thought. "Bigoted-Virtue Lin won't quit."

There were more junks than Garner and the lookout had noted at first glance, and they were big ones, clumsy looking things with their high poops and high prows, but carrying all the sail that could be crammed on, and all the guns as well. This long line was a gauntlet to run, a gauntlet whose other menace was the coast of Hainan. Junks competing with clipper and fast New England brigantine ceased to be a comical notion.

Neither of the ships astern had noted their danger; the *prahu* was so far ahead and offshore that her lookout could penetrate the haze, which all but hid the looming hulks. On the other hand, the beat of gongs told that the navy had spotted its prey, if only because of the warning guns and bells rung for mutual protection during the heavy fog.

"Back and hail them!"

Farid got it. The familiar maneuver, possibly only to a ship whose stern and bow are identical, was performed now, and under Garner's eyes: the sail came about, the men on the outrigger struts shifted to accord, and in a flash, she was racing in a direction which only a moment before would have been backward.

Haze hid the seaward menace before the *prahu's* crew had fairly committed her to sail across the *China Queen's* course to warn her.

Erskine was on the poop. So was Syria and her father.

Garner yelled, "Imperial junks on the port bow!"

Erskine's face changed again. The *China Queen* hove to. She signalled the *Sylph*, and a man spoke to her with the trumpet.

Antonia handed Farid his jewelled bonus, and went up the ladder. Garner followed, after giving him his pistol. The *prahu's* skipper showed all his teeth in a merry grin, and made a slicing gesture across his throat. Funniest thing he'd ever seen, a crazy white man buying the fastest trip of his life, only to race into a trap. And then Farid began beating northward.

"Take your post, mister, I've been standing your watch!" Erskine said. Then, "All hands on deck! Man the guns!"

Signal shots were fired, and rockets, so that the *Sylph* would clear for action. Already, the dark hulks were near. Their line was so long, and the seaway so narrow that a race through the gauntlet was out of the question. Following Butler's experience had once more kicked back. Or was it just opium hoodoo, Kwan Yin's resentment against the poppy poison?

Stuns'ls were spread, aloft and alow. Though the *China Queen* raced along, more than speed was required. This wasn't a division of the imperial fleet; as they came down before the wind, they opened fire. Gongs beat with a ferocious clangor. The decks were jammed with swordsmen and musketeers. This was not heave-to for inspection. This was a finish fight, and with every chance of there being far more junks than opium runners left when the smoke cleared away.

WIND howled through holes shot through the *China Queen's* canvas. Erskine stood at the weather rigging to direct the battle. Heavy slugs from jingals screeched and buzzed and spatted. Then the port guns answered. The "doctor" was in the galley, heating shot as well as water. Arms had been served, and all hands but helmsman, Erskine, and Garner lay flat behind the bulwarks. Butler's guns roared from the starboard quarter as the brigantine trailed astern.

Dom Manuel, with Antonia giving him a hand, came out of the apprentice's room. "Get below, you damn fools!" Garner shouted. "Crawl, don't walk!"

"You don' crawl," Antonia retorted. "What is the funny noise?"

"Slugs from jingals, tell the little idiot, and keep your head down!" he told Manuel.

"I feel good for a fight," was the answer, as he hustled Antonia toward the salon. "Where is the pistol or something?"

The line of junks was too long to clear. Those already cleared were raking the opium ships from the rear with everything but musket and pistol. Rockets whizzed and hissed across the bulwark. Some ran afoul of the rigging, where they exploded.

Whether bullet, shell fragments, or rocket blast, Erskine staggered from his station. Hanson, the second, turned helplessly to Garner. A yelp, a gasp of panic told what the crew thought at seeing the skipper crumpled on deck. Hale, who had just come from the salon, looked sick, and nearly dropped the pistol and cutlass he'd got from the arms chest. Syria, trying to yank him back to cover, quit saying, "Come back, you old fool!" and would have hurried toward Erskine.

A two-ounce slug thumped into the fife-rail. Another cut a shroud. "Will you blasted nitwits get under cover!" Garner yelled. "We'll tend to your precious skipper when we have time, all right, drag him under cover. Quick, you—you—"

Someone handed him Erskine's powerful glasses. "All right, now find me a cocked hat," he growled, "but I don't feel like Lord Nelson."

It was Jenkins; the man grinned and saluted. Others cheered. Somehow, the dullard and the first officer had checked dismay that could have become panic.

XXXI

THE battle of the Bogue, tailing after British men o' war, had been entirely different from this ambush. No one felt salty. But the blast of the *China Queen's* guns added to newly won reassurance. The "doctor" served the first heated shot. It wasn't as red as his face, but the next one would be, for he screeched, "Lean on them bellows, or I'll beat your brains out!"

Men were stretching boarding nets.

"Stow 'em! No one's boarding us!"

Garner sized up the rapidly narrowing gap between the far end of the pirate line, and the Hainan shore. Farid could easily make it. Maybe Erskine could. Either make it, or swing into the line of junks, as had that British man o' war, with all guns blazing. The only trouble was, the *Hyacinth* had a broadside of thirty-seven guns, whereas the *China Queen* had only six, and far lighter ones.

"Lift the main hatch!"

The second stared. Garner added, "Throw that opium overboard!"

He hardly knew why he gave the order. Logically, such a move would lift her bow appreciably, giving her more speed. If anyone had asked him, that would have been his answer. He'd not have dared give the real one: that the gilded lady, she who looks mercifully down at mankind, would take a hand.

All but the gunners fell to.

Chest after chest of Patna went over the side.

Hermon Hale, seeing, let out a cry of anger and anguish and incredulity. "Are you crazy? Defend your ship, you fool!"

Garner did not answer. He swept Hale into the scuppers with a backhand thrust. Then, "Mr. Hanson!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get Mr. Erskine's keys."

"Yes, sir."

Only then did Garner know what he had said. Taking command by acting, that was one thing. Referring to the skipper, who might be little more than dazed and blood-blinded, as "Mr. Erskine," was something else. A hair split four ways, yet some inner voice had ordered Garner to take command, and for more than the emergency. She was now his ship in a way that was deeper and more permanent than any taking over in emergency. The future had been speaking through him.

The rumble of guns became music, the stench, the deep billowing clouds of powder stench became perfume.

"The keys, sir."

"Open the strong box, get that sycee on deck!"

Hermon Hale was now on his feet and fairly dancing with fury. "You—you—I'll—"

"You little idiot!" Garner thundered, deliberately as though he had nothing to do, and all day to do it in, "I'm saving her the only way she can be saved." He pointed at the first chests of silver. "That's going

over, and then she'll be clean, and all herself."

"Are you crazy?" the horrified owner asked, and backed away.

Garner grinned. "I'm doing the one thing Erskine wouldn't ever have dared do."

He levelled the glasses. The flagship was hard abeam. What he saw gave him a thrill. It was a sign. Governor Tang's personal pennon was at her masthead. Tang, turned pirate, was so eager for vengeance that instead of waiting for the *China Queen* to come back from Calcutta, laden to the plimsoll marks with opium, he had to destroy her now, in order to gain face.

"Doctor, how's the shot?"

"Red, sir!"

Garner commanded, "Lay on the admiral's junk!" Then, "Up helm!"

He got her closer to the wind. Silver was now plopping into the sea, $2,000 a splash. She was more responsive. Her change of trim gave her speed. Garner was winning, somewhat from logic, but far more because Kwan Yin was pleased.

Fortunately, and thanks to Amos Butler, Erskine had spent time drilling the gunners at Macao.

Glowing shot came from the galley.

Then the broadside. Garner prayed, and not to anyone a Christian would bear in mind; he prayed to ship, and to the smiling, gilded lady.

ALL six shots were good. The junk erupted in a blast whose flame towered high as a dozen masts, end to end. The magazine had let go. The vessels on either side were wrecks, and wholly out of control.

The men were too amazed to cheer. Garner, however, was not surprised, even though the results had been beyond wildest probability. Since half a dozen red-hot shot had been the utmost he could serve the enemy, half a dozen they had got. The broadside could have missed. It could have started trifling fires on deck or in the rigging, perhaps enough to hamper and distract the pirate gunners. As it was, Tang had been blown to kingdom come, and his going had left panic, and a broad gap behind him.

Garner, seeing the fact, was merely grateful. Though his words were not audible, the motion of his lips clearly shaped them: *"Now we're going through, lady! You've done yours, we'll do the rest."*

From then on, he was heard: "Up helm! Hard up! Slack off sheets!"

She came up in the wind, all canvas shaking.

". . . haul sheets aft. . . ."

Now on starboard tack, she made for the gap in the line. He'd once said she could beat against the wind faster than a cotton boat could run before it, and here he was, proving it, racing her to angle through gates of fire. Opium still went over the side, until Garner made the men stop and take cover. The pirates relaid their guns, but with little effect; they had not recovered from the shock of seeing Tang and his flagship disappear, and two others reduced to flaming wreckage. The *China Queen,* low, narrow and knifing into the line, was a poor target. There was nothing to hit but canvas—acres of that, and they couldn't riddle enough of it to count.

The sailmaker had been stitching canvas bags and filling them with musket balls. So, as she forged through the gap, the *China Queen* fired canister, port and starboard. Each twelve-pounder had become an oversized, sawed-off shotgun, spraying the enemy bulwarks, though doing no damage to anything but the pirates' nerves. Garner's company blazed away with muskets. They jeered when the nearest junk's guns sent a six-foot chunk of the main yard crashing to the deck. She was through, and with half the sail she carried, she could outrace the pirate flotilla, now that she'd won to the open sea.

The enemy, knowing this, closed the crescent to bear down on the *Sylph.* Garner could not help her. While he was sorry for her crew, he was glad that no merchant ship could be expected to take the offensive against such overwhelming odds, odds from which she'd escaped by something more than luck. Amos Butler was near the end of his last voyage. His cleverness would never again corrupt an honest ship, or a reckless master, or a greedy owner. So, while he did not like to think of Butler's final stand on a blazing deck, he felt that the *China Queen* had shaken her hoodoo, her enemy, her evil star.

Or had she? "Star" made him think of Joab Erskine. He went below to see how

the skipper fared. When Garner came out of the skipper's quarters, Syria and her father were waiting. He told them, "Mainly shock and concussion. Pieces of shell and rocket cut him up around the head quite a bit, and powder flame got him."

"Oh! His eyes, you mean? They looked terrible."

"I wouldn't know. I think they'll be all right, just keep him in the dark. I'm afraid I'll have to take her to Singapore. After that—well, see what the doctors have to say."

"I don't know what we'd done if you'd not overhauled us."

Hermon Hale, who had sat there studying his fingertips, looked up and gave them both a sharp eye. "What did happen to you?" he demanded. Then, "Never mind, that's your business, Garner."

"If you want to know, you might ask Antonia. She saw it happen. And you might read the log."

His odd smile made Hale ask, "What's it say? I bet you've looked at it?"

"Naturally. I had to enter that the captain was disabled, and that the first officer took command. And I'll be adding a list of damages, the amount of shot used, and so on."

"Well, what does the log say?"

"It says that she weighed anchor at four bells, which is probably correct. It says also that she sailed without First Officer Dennis Garner, which is correct. It does not say why she sailed nearly four hours ahead of time. And it's a bit odd that he'd not send someone ashore to look for me—he'd told me we'd weigh anchor at sunrise."

Syria's face changed. "I was asleep. But Manuel wasn't. He was sitting up counting the minutes till you got back."

They found Manuel on the poop deck, with Antonia, who now looked very much herself. Manuel broke in before he had heard Syria repeat more than half what Garner had told her.

"When it is midnight, I know something is wrong. I cannot go ashore. I beg the skipper to send someone. He tells me, with very big heart, I should go to sleep, don't I trust Mr. Garner, but if I don't, he will send someone. He gives me some grog and I stop worry, then I take what you call it, the cat-nap, I have spend too long count-

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ing the minutes, I think I nod a little until the men come back—and I am asleep until sunrise. Then I know everything is wrong, but I say nothing, I still trust my good friend—and am I wrong?"

"But why'd he leave you?" Syria demanded.

"I'd have been on the beach for six-eight weeks till you came back," Garner told her. "On the beach, and without a penny in my pockets. I was slugged and robbed. What'd I do? Starve, or be shanghaied, or else ship out to get off the beach. A pretty unreliable first officer."

"I begin to understand."

Garner rubbed his head. "I began to understand when I was slugged silly in the pawnbroker's courtyard. If that wasn't one of Butler's men that got me, I'll eat a hawser."

Hermon Hale had been scowling at the deck. He said, abruptly, "This ship's hoodooed. Pirate bait. Off Borneo, off Macao, off Hainan." He smiled sourly. "Astrology's nonsense, but it does look as though she's to be killed by human means. Fire or something, you said. And twice it came near being fire. You're entitled to follow your hobby."

THE old man was being gracious in his sour way. Garner shrugged. "Whatever there is in astrology, I don't think a beginner can get anything but confusion out of it. Call the whole business coincidence. Though maybe it wasn't. After all, it didn't take the stars to tell me that the skipper would murder a ship, any ship at all, if he kept on with hard driving. He's the best I've ever sailed with, no denying. All I mean is, you ought to save your luck till you really need it. Look at the luck he wasted making time that was no more than a couple thousand dollars extra profit on a voyage."

Hale wanted to object, he couldn't stand hearing anyone blaspheming profits; but he swallowed his objections. "That opium you threw overboard, and all that sycee. I'm not complaining, you lightened her enough to make speed. Charging for that line of pirates was crazier than anything Erskine ever did."

"I had to. That's what I meant. I could also tell you that chests of opium and

silver were handy to jettison. But I won't. The truth is, I was so scared I had to earn our luck. You understand, get rid of the dirty drug and the dirty money, so you and Erskine'd deserve what scrap of luck we might have. It was a way of praying without words."

They looked each other eye to eye, and Hale's glance finally shifted. "I'm through with opium. I'm having more clippers built. One for Erskine. You're taking her out next time." He turned, and said over his shoulder, "She seems to understand you, or maybe it's the other way about. Good luck."

He went below, muttering to himself. Antonia and Manuel were too engrossed with each other to have noticed that Garner had made good the crazy prediction he'd tossed at Erskine, the night the fire rafts crept up, off Macao.

Syria said to Garner, "He means it, he's cured, someone has finally beaten something into his thick head."

"Your father's right. She does seem to understand me, or maybe I understand her."

Syria laughed. "You idiot, he wasn't talking about the *China Queen,* he meant me."

Garner glanced about him. The skipper wasn't supposed to be human, least of all on the poop deck. He nudged Syria toward the companionway, and as they stepped into the salon, Garner said, "Then we'll tend to that in Singapore, before your father's himself again."

For the third time that day, Garner's luck was somewhat too much for wondering, so that he could only accept it, as a fact that did not have to be understood. It was not until he had an armful of Syria, and she was kissing him instead of letting him kiss her, that he could believe all that had happened.

When she finally drew a deep breath, and sank back to her heels, she blinked, and laughed an odd little laugh. Her voice was shaky as she said, "If Joab hadn't taken such punishment today, I'd fix something up for him!"

"What, darling?"

"I'd make the skipper marry us, that'd teach him a lesson!"

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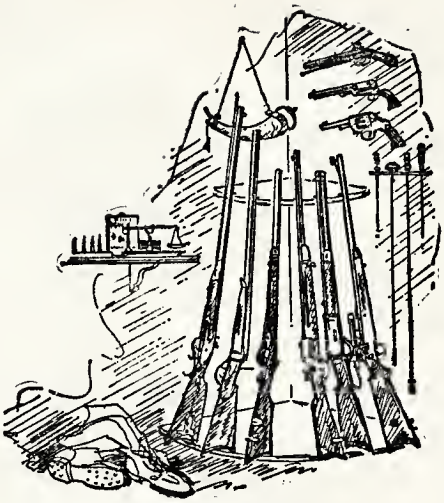

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Back in 1903, March 31 to be exact, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice was organized by the Secretary of War, then the Honorable Elihu Root.

The National Board consists of not more than twenty-one members appointed by the Secretary of War from representatives of the military forces and from the country at large.

The Board is responsible for recommending to the Secretary of War reasonable rules and regulations for instruction of able-bodied male citizens of the United States in marksmanship, the promotion of practice in the use of rifled arms, the maintenance

and management of matches or competitions in the use of such arms, and the issuance in connection therewith, of necessary ammunition, targets and other supplies, and the awarding to competitors of trophies, prizes and badges. The Board is also responsible for conducting the National Matches, and the conduct of rifle and pistol competitions in schools and colleges.

Since the organization of the National Board thirty-two National Matches have been conducted. The first at Sea Girt, N. J., in 1903. Since then Matches have been held at Sea Girt, Fort Riley, Kan.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Caldwell, N. J., and of course at Camp Perry, Ohio. As a matter of fact all but seven were held at Camp Perry, the first in 1907 and the last in 1941 just before the war.

The first Matches were limited to Regular Service and State National Guard Organizations, but with the passage of the National Defence Act in 1916 civilian teams from each State could enter into the festivities. Also a Small Arms Firing School was organized and became part of the National Program.

In 1903 fifteen teams participated in the National Matches, while in 1939 there were 128 entries in the rifle team match, 33 in the pistol team, 2,037 in the National Individual Rifle Match and 622 in the National Individual Pistol Match.

When (and if) the next National Matches are held there is no telling how many entries will be registered, but you can bet your bottom dollar the number will be high.

Incidentally, if you have never attended these Matches you really have missed something. For instance, the Small Arms Firing School includes both rifle and pistol instruction, and a certificate of proficiency is given to those who satisfactorily finish the course, indicating that said finisher is qualified to be an instructor.

In the past there has also been a Police Officers School and a Junior Rifle School for boys and girls under nineteen.

To carry out the provisions of the National Defence Act the Office of Director of Civilian Marksmanship (D. C. M.) was established in 1916. This act authorized the issue of certain War Department equipment to schools and civilian rifle clubs.

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The D. C. M. has charge of the sale of small-arms equipment used in target practice, to civilians who are members of the National Rifle Association.

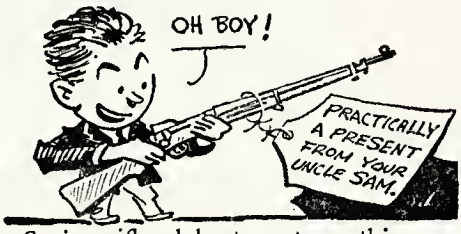
Any citizen of good repute may join this Association, the dues of which are $3.00 a year, which includes a subscription to the American Rifleman, a magazine devoted exclusively to shooting.

The issue of Army qualification badges or certificates is another duty of the D. C. M.

Three classes of applicants may receive assistance from the D. C. M., schools, senior rifle clubs, and junior rifle clubs organized for rifle practice.

Schools in order to receive the benefits, must maintain a uniformed corps of cadets (at least forty members above the age of fourteen) during the entire school year. They must have an adequate course in military training and must conduct target practice in accordance with the regulations prescribed by the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice. One .30 caliber rifle is issued to each cadet, and one .22 caliber rifle for each five cadets up to ten such rifles. Ammunition, targets and other necessary accessories are also issued.

Applications for assistance must be submitted to the D. C. M. by the President or Principal of the school through the Adjutant General of the State or Territory. This application must have the approval of the Adjutant General of the State or Territory, and that of the Superintendent of Schools or Chairman of the Board of Trustees or other governing body of the school.



Senior rifle clubs to get on this gravy train must be enrolled with the D. C. M. with a membership of at least ten physically fit male citizens above the age of eighteen years who are not eligible to receive federal aid for this activity from any other source. Clubs must maintain affiliation with the National Rifle Association and must carry on target practice as prescribed.

Two U. S. Caliber .30 M1903 (Spring-

fields) may be issued to such clubs of 10 to 25 members (who participate in rifle practice) and one additional rifle for each additional ten members (or fraction thereof) not to exceed eight rifles to a club.

Two U. S. .22 rifles, .22 and .30 caliber ammunition, targets and necessary accessories are also issued.

Junior rifle clubs must be enrolled with the office of the Director of Marksmanship and have a membership of at least ten physically fit male citizens between the ages of fourteen and eighteen who are not eligible to receive federal aid for this activity from any other source, must be sponsored by a responsible male citizen above the age of twenty-one years, who will serve as chief supervisor and instructor, must maintain affiliation with the National Rifle Association, and must conduct small-arms practice and fire the junior small-bore qualification course indicated by the D. C. M. Two .22 caliber rifles may be issued for each additional five members, not to exeed ten rifles to any club, also targets and necessary accessories.

Qualification badges are issued to all individual members of schools and clubs qualifying on the authorized course.

The number of schools and clubs that may receive issues is limited by annual appropriations.

The selection of rifles, ammunition and ammunition components that may be sold to individual members of the National Rifle Association for their own use (and not for re-sale) is not as extensive as before the war.

Two types of Springfields are available, the regular service job, U. S. Rifle Caliber .30 M1903 and the M1903A1 which has a pistol grip stock.

The U. S. Rifle, M1917 commonly referred to as the Enfield is sold, in used serviceable condition, for $7.50 plus packing and shipping costs, which is practically a giveaway.

These three rifles are, of course, chambered for the .30-'06 cartridge, government and commercial.

The U. S. Rifle Caliber .22, M2 is also available. An excellent gun for target use.

Ammunition in calibers .30-'06, 45 Auto. (pistol), 38 Special and .22 Long Rifle, and components may be purchased.

All in all, Uncle Sam takes pretty good care of U. S. citizens who want to shoot.

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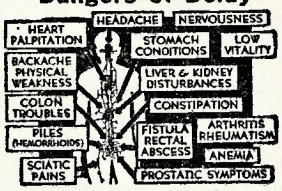

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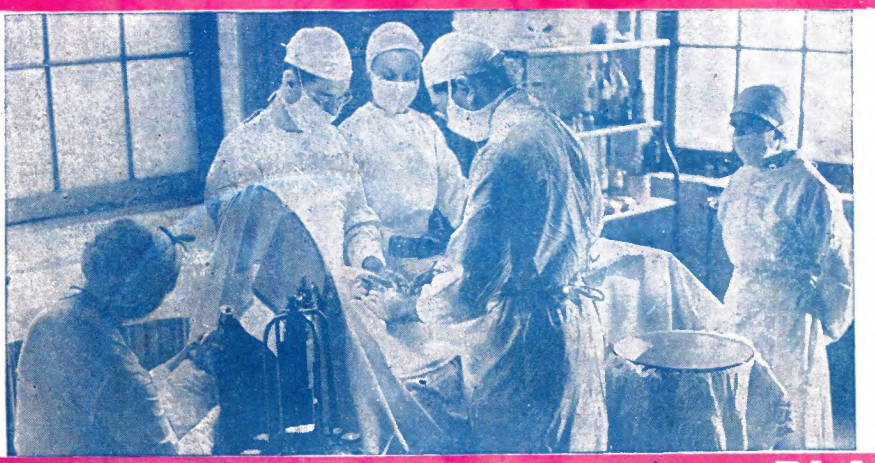

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